

to heal her daughter nevertheless. The conflict embarrasses most modern translators, who mangle the original Greek grammar, repainting the scene as a rational rabbinic discourse. But in Greek the woman's reply is as abrasive as Jesus' insult. (Her word *nail* for "yes," though commonplace today, was strongly emphatic in Hellenistic times.) "It is *too* fair!!" the pagan mother hollers back.

"Because even we dogs get to eat scraps your overfed Jewish brats drop on the floor!" And Jesus yields to her without admitting a logical or ethical error, but because he appreciates that she will fight for her convictions. "Lady, have you ever got big faith! Okay, Okay, your daughter's healed!"

Modern Christians unfamiliar with midrash may wince at the mean figure Jesus cuts here. On its face the story tells how a chauvinistic Jewish male healer was forced to accommodate women and non-Jews. But the gospel writer knows that among contemporary religious leaders, Jesus was uniquely generous in dining with outcasts and counted women among his closest disciples: this radical openness above all led to his death. So in classic halakah fashion, the evangelist spins a yarn about Jesus learning the very principles he became famous for. And like God in the Genesis and Exodus bargaining stories we examined above, Jesus appears wrongheaded and reluctant at first, until someone pounds his most distinctive teaching home to him. Here is classic storytelling rhetoric—not at all diminishing Jesus but rather exalting him as a teacher parallel to God in Scripture.

Indeed, this halakah may be the finest midrash in the New Testament. The woman's pagan identity reflects the storyteller's own immediate situation, as a proper midrash should do. Soon after Jesus' death, the earliest Christians debated whether his messianic victory was meant for Jews only or should be spread among the heathen worldwide, as Paul was already doing. Gentile peoples might never become proper Jews (Paul frankly argued they should not try) but instead must receive salvation by their faith alone. Mark's halakah shows which side he believes Jesus would take in that debate: by making the woman a citizen of Israel's ancient enemy nation, the story poignantly dramatizes Jesus' real openness to all. And by evoking God's parallel behavior in Hebrew Scripture, he implies that Jesus settles the debate with divine authority.

More authoritatively yet, Mark founds his argument on Jesus' own words. Formal comparison indicates that the Syro-Phoenician mother's story is a halakah on the same parable of the corrupt judge, which Luke gives us and we examined above. Evidently both gospel writers know some version of this tale. In both stories a woman achieves by importunate aggression what seems hopelessly out of her reach. In both, a man yields without renouncing an attitude familiar to listeners at the time; he only recoils from her assault. By copying Jesus' narrative form, Mark's tale persuades

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MEDITATION AND STORYTELLING PATHS TO COMPASSION

By Garth Gilchrist

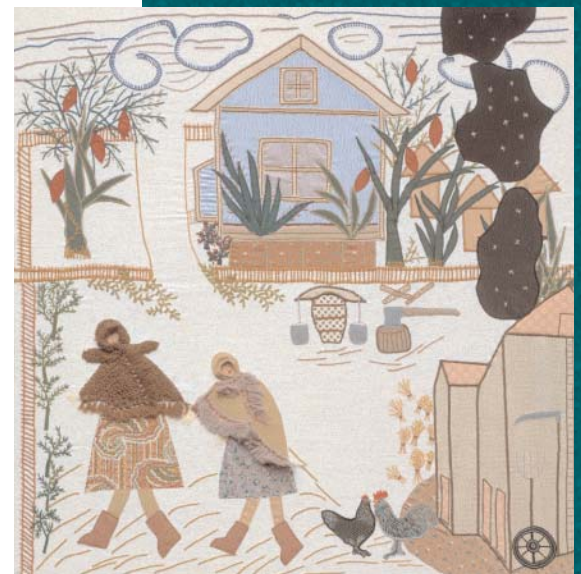
Seven years old, I sprawl across the braided rug in front of the fire, transfixed as story records drop down one by one onto the platter of the Grundig—the unbearable tension as William Tell shoots the apple from his son's head, or Dr. Suess's Bartholomew Cubbins thunders up the castle hill on the mighty charger. My mother tucks me in with a life-on-the-prairie tale from her girlhood, and I see the corn blowing. She shuts the door, and I lie in the dark, smelling corn until I'm lulled out into the forest night by stories with no words: wind washing through fir boughs, raindrops plinking onto wet soil, an owl cry in the dark. Twelve now, at summer camp in Washington's high Cascade Mountains, I am among the crowd minister Cliff Custer transfixed with stories, gospel events two thousand years old, but they are electric, riveting; somehow he is in them and sweeps us away with him. I am never the same again.

Seventeen, away at school in the Sierra Nevada, I begin to meditate in earnest. Still the mind, open the heart. I notice that I'm more concerned for the people around me—I'm sensing more deeply. Sometimes I can feel inside mountains as I ski. The oaks seem expressive and welcoming as I pass beneath them. Summers, as a camp counselor, I tell tales, stories of all kinds, and the kids gather round, eyes eager, ears straining, minds afire. I go to college, become a teacher, use stories to awaken imagination and the ability to feel the world deeply. Sometimes kids shut their eyes and listen. Meditation.

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In early November 1942, Mania and I made our way to the village of Grabowka, where we told people that we were Polish Catholic farm girls who had been separated from our family after our farm was taken over by Folksdeutsche. The night after we arrived, I had a dream that my mother came to get me, running and pulling me along. "Why are we running?" I asked her. She said, "Because the black sky is falling, and when it reaches the ground, we will die." When I looked back, black pieces of clouds were falling to the earth.

*No. 26, Black Sky Falling.
Embroidery and fabric collage,
1988. 36 3/16 in. x 37 1/4 in.*



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JUNE 1943, IN GRABOWKA. WHILE I WAS TENDING THE GARDEN I HAD PLANTED, TWO NAZI SOLDIERS APPEARED AND BEGAN TO TALK TO ME. I COULDN'T LET THEM KNOW THAT I COULD UNDERSTAND THEM, SO I JUST SHOOK MY HEAD AS THEY SPOKE. DZIADZEK, THE OLD FARMER WHO HAD TAKEN ME IN AS HIS HOUSEKEEPER, CAME TO STAND WATCH NEARBY, BUT THE HONEY BEES RESCUED ME FIRST, SUDDENLY SWARMING AROUND THE SOLDIERS. "WHY AREN'T THEY STINGING YOU?" THE SOLDIERS ASKED DZIADZEK AS THEY RAN OUT OF THE GARDEN. ESTHER NISENAL KRINITZ 1996

No. 28, Honey Bees Save Me.
Embroidery and fabric collage,
1996. 31 11/16 in. x 34 in.

MEDITATION AND STORYTELLING *Continued from page 9*

Twenty-seven, an author, I'm traveling the country to tell nature stories and teach environmental education. Grownups listen to stories of the land; they approach afterward, tears in their eyes, and tell me of their childhood trees, streams, and thickets. The words have touched them, they say, reawakened old, wonderful memories. "I could see as clear as day the pictures you painted with your words," they exclaim. "I could see everything as if I were there."

We understand only what we experience. If someone is awake to a perception or understanding and can embody that perception in a vibrant expression, this charged, spirited communication provides a vehicle for others to awaken, perceive, experience, and understand. It's almost like a transfusion. The storyteller's language is far more than just words. The language includes body, face, eyes, breath, stance, rhythm, tone, and presence. If a storyteller tries to control all of this manipulatively,

through technique, it's tremendously hard work and rings false. But if a storyteller deeply lives and feels his story, characters, and meanings, all this is translated naturally into the body and breath, voice and tone, face and eyes, and the story is communicated powerfully, viscerally, to the listeners. Consciousness is communicated. An authentic experience is conveyed.

Meditation helps me as a storyteller to enter my stories, characters, and settings; to find a deep resonance with the essence of a story. Meditation is listening, stilling the body and turbulent emotions, quieting the jabber of the mind. A deeper presence shyly emerges. Buddhists call it mindfulness, Hindus *dhyana* or absorption, Christians contemplation, nature lovers awe; it is coming into touch with the quiet heart of life that beats inside the robin, the thief, the friend, the mountain, and ourselves.

Storytelling involves quieting our private personality and preoccupations long enough to absorb ourselves in the reality of another person or place for a time, to feel their heart and their truth, and then to give them voice, allow them to delight, inspire, broaden, and instruct. An ant can teach and amplify us, as can a felon.

Age thirty-seven, I'm talking with prisoners. I say little and listen and listen and listen as their stories come rolling out. Parting, they say how wonderful it was to talk.

It is good to listen, to give space for stories to come out and be heard. Whether we listen deeply in meditation or listen deeply to others' words, we come close to essence and draw it out. Listening is like pouring water down a well shaft to prime the pump. It gets things flowing. It invites the water up.

One of the inmates, Cass, is a white-haired, blue-eyed Sioux, 55, bronze skin smooth as a child's. He grew up on a South Dakota reservation but was taken away from his parents to government school when he was eight and not allowed to visit home. When he came back at 14, his parents were both dead. A little boy with one eye adopted him, looked up to him like a savior, then like a father. They were inseparable for four years, living, working, cooking, eating, and playing together. Cass taught him everything. "He was like my son." But then the government took the son away, took him away to school. Cass was angry. When he was older, a white man tried to take away his business. The anger flooded out, and he beat the man. Now he's in prison.

Recently Cass had been on an inmate crew helping an outside contractor put up chicken wiring to keep sparrows from nesting in the beams and pooping on the exercise equipment below. The project went on for two weeks. It took a long time, what with short hours and scaffolding that had to be taken down every day for security.

"Don't you feel strange, Cass," I ask, "about helping to fence the birds out of their own nests, being Native and all?"

"I'll tell you something." Cass winks and leans closer to me. "I tore a couple of big holes in the wires before we climbed down for the last time. The birds'll get in just fine."

Over the years I've come to understand that the aims of storytelling and meditation are similar: to awaken compassionate understanding, to take us beyond the confines of our own perspective and smallness, our own judgments and apprehensions, to help us see things from another's point of view, to feel into another's heart. Our pedestrian concern for efficiency, for example, could blind us to another's essential reverence for freedom, until we understand his story.

More fundamentally, both meditation and storytelling connect us to other people—to everything, really, on the irreducible level of shared beingness. Whether we seek understanding or wisdom through spiritual discipline, through art, science, philosophy, devotion to God, or compassionate social service, we arrive at the same awakening: we are intimately related to every other person and thing. We begin to respond with compassion to the infinitely varied but universally rooted expressions of human nature.

Forty-four, I drive out one winter afternoon and see a young Latina at the bus stop. An hour and a half later when I return, she is still there, cold, her forehead furrowed. I roll the window down. "Are you okay?" I call out in Spanish.

"I'm waiting for my friend," she returns, "*pero no viene*"—she hasn't come.

"I'll give you a ride," I holler, swinging the door open, and we set off for "the Canal," a district where many recent immigrants live in cramped apartments. The young woman, 30 maybe, seems happy for the ride, for the warmth of the car, for the company. Paula is shy but apparently trusts me, for as we drive she tells me her story. She's only just arrived from Guatemala, where her husband "disappeared" when he stated his intention to retire from the army's ruthless intelligence unit. Paula came home one day to find her house in shambles and a scribbled note from her husband telling her to get out of the country as fast as she could. She barely escaped, fleeing for her life, leaving everything: the husband she still doesn't know is alive or dead, her home, her teaching

June 1943, in
Grabowka. While I
was tending the gar-
den I had planted,
two Nazi soldiers
appeared and began
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stood them, so I just
shook my head as
they spoke. Dziadek,
the old farmer who
had taken me in as
his housekeeper,
came to stand watch
nearby, but the
honeybees rescued
me first, swarming
around the soldiers.
"Why aren't they
stinging you?" the
soldiers asked
Dziadek as they ran
out of the garden.

Detail of No. 28, Honey Bees
Save Me.



position with the university, and her four-year-old boy, who she hopes is safe with her parents, if they are safe. Her journey north was a nightmare. Now she's here, working as a house cleaner.

I say, "Your story needs to be heard. Most people driving by didn't even notice you. Those who did saw you as a brown woman waiting for the bus. They don't understand." So I work with others; we get a grant and begin to record the stories of the Latino immigrants. Amazing stories, heroic epics, terrible, joyful, courageous tales. We put them on the radio so people might understand better who these people are. Some will be interested; some hearts might open; some will begin to look beyond the surface, begin to wonder, begin to feel.

Meditation awakens intuitive compassion. Stories nourish understanding.

I visited my mother recently in her new home in New Mexico. "I have a surprise for you," she said. She put an old LP on a little portable record player she'd bought just for this. Down went the needle and up came the story, and all of a sudden I was behind Bartholomew Cubbins again on the back of the charger, thundering up the castle hill. As I lay in bed that night in the dark, I listened out the open window and could hear the wind, not in fir trees but in aspens. It didn't matter. The quiet whisper, the wordless universal story took me, as it had when I was seven, into the heart of the world.

A lifelong student of world religion and a Hindu monk for six years, Garth Gilchrist writes, teaches, and performs stories broadly. His recordings are available through Dawn Publications. Contact him at GarthTales@aol.com.

July 1940. I had heard that the Nazis had a dentist in their camp, so when I developed a terrible toothache, I got one of my Polish friends to go to the camp with me. Since the Germans wouldn't have helped me if they had known I was Jewish, I taught my friend to say, in German, "My sister has a toothache." After the dentist took out my tooth, he gave me a bar of chocolate. When I got home, my mother was shocked that I had had the nerve to go to the Nazis for help.

INTO THE HEART OF THE OTHER INTERFAITH STORY CIRCLES

By Gert Johnson

I stepped into storytelling thirteen years ago. During my graduate studies in theology I wrote a master's thesis on the use of storytelling in moral education with adolescents, documenting my work using this approach with my high school religious studies classes. This experience literally transformed my teaching and left me longing for further knowledge and experimentation with story.

Members of the local guild of the National Storytelling Network (NSN) were my first mentors in storytelling. I learned much from attending their circles. However, their emphasis was on telling stories with an eye to professional performance. I dreamed of a circle where the focus would be on stories of faith and spirituality—stories that could be a source of revelation, inspiration, and possible transformation in everyday life. This circle would be composed of peoples of different faiths, bringing the riches of their story traditions to the table, recognizing the value of our diverse truths and those we hold in common.

My dream became a reality in 1993. There were just three of us at that first circle. During the next four years we met at a fixed place, our circle remaining small in size and scope and top-heavy with Christian tellers and listeners. Looking back on that time, I am reminded of the parable of the mustard seed and of the uncommon grace God can give us to have faith and persevere in the face of things "not yet seen."

This past September, Interfaith Story Circle celebrated its tenth anniversary at an interfaith sanctuary in Albany, New York. We are now a storytelling group made up of people of many faiths, a real mix of professional tellers and those who come simply out of a love for story. Our circles meet monthly from September to June, each hosted by a different faith community and led by a storyteller with expertise in a particular area. The teller spends a bit of time sharing his/her knowledge and a few stories on that month's theme. Then the circle is open for all to tell. No one need plan or sign up to tell. We simply allow the stories to move and inspire us, to take us where they will.

Each circle begins and ends with prayer and runs for two hours. There is no break. None is needed. One story begets another, catching us up and carrying us along. We are often reluctant to see our time together come to an end. After the circle, we leaf through theme-related books that the teller has brought, pick up the provided list of resources, and linger a bit. As lights are dimmed, doors are closed, and people head home, one can still hear bits of stories being exchanged, floating up into the night sky.



The week before our anniversary circle I spent some time alone in the sanctuary. Sitting beneath the round stained glass windows, their vividly swirling blues portraying the energy of creation and of interfaith dialogue, I scanned a list of our past circles. One after another I drew them up in my mind's eye, picturing the sacred spaces where we gather: Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches, Jewish synagogues and temples, a local Buddhist center, and the Hindu temple and Muslim mosque that will host us this spring. I reflected on the variety and richness of our times together: evenings of tales from the various faith traditions; circles sharing stories of death and dying, bereavement, suffering, and reconciliation; our yearly gathering of teens telling tales; circles focused on telling our own stories for discernment, prayer, and spiritual enrichment; and those that have explored the use of storytelling in liturgy and ministry.

One after another, I remembered stories that had been told. One after another, I silently thanked the tellers who had led these circles, those who had come to listen, and those who felt prompted to tell in return. They are the people who have helped Interfaith Story Circle grow from the mustard seed it once was into the tree with many branches it is today.

A week later, as we gathered in the sanctuary, circling around our "spiritual fire" to celebrate ten years of telling, many of the same people were present in person, and they spoke readily of what Interfaith Story Circle has meant to them.

Marni, an accomplished teacher/teller/coach and author of books on storytelling, spoke of how she was "shy" at first to speak of her faith in any public way; of how having her stories welcomed and honored in Interfaith Circle has not only enabled her to share her personal journeys of faith but also has spilled over into her work in prison ministry and with troubled teens, helping those people to do the same.

Waynet, a student at a local graduate school of theology and ministry, told of coming to story circle last year to help satisfy the school's requirement for practical experience in ministry. She spoke enthusiastically of her first time with us, of hearing a minister "storytell Matthew's dry and

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No. 30, Russian Infantry March
In. Embroidery and fabric collage,
1995. 31 11/16 in. x 32 13/16 in.

INTO THE HEART OF THE OTHER *Continued from page 13*

boring genealogy of Jesus” in a way that awakened her to “the power story has to bring Scripture and theology to life.”

Anne remembered how she first came to story circle intending to be a listener but soon felt compelled to tell. “Telling in circle has opened me up and given me the courage to share this gift in my faith community,” she said. Anne recently portrayed the biblical character Elizabeth in her storytelling of the angel Gabriel’s visitation. Her fellow parishioners’ enthusiastic response prompted her to consider more tellings of women in Scripture.

Joe, a producer of many story events in our area, reminisced about the more formal Advent, Winter Lights, and Lenten tellings we have held in the broader community. Joe was instrumental in moving us in this direction, encouraging us to include free-will offerings to benefit food pantries

and homeless shelters as part of these programs, adding a service dimension to our community tellings. Kate, who is not a member of any faith tradition, shared her own experience at Winter Lights. "I came feeling out of kilter," she said. "Being welcomed and hearing the stories brought peace to my spirit. And seeing the advent wreath, the menorah, and the lights of the Hindu tradition on the altar, all coexisting, gave me a sense that we are all part of the Light."

I spoke of a member who could not be with us at the celebration: twelve-year-old Adah, a naturally gifted teller who often comes with her mother to circle and delights us with her stories. With coaching, she has summoned the courage to tell tales from her Jewish tradition at two Winter Lights programs. Adah's presence is motivating us to work at making our circle truly intergenerational.

Mussarat spoke of having been invited to come to our evening of Muslim tales not long after 9/11. She had hesitated, she explained, because "it was a time when people were suspicious of Muslims"; she was also a bit skeptical because the facilitator had a non-Muslim name. Her feelings changed during the circle, however, as she realized that the people who told that night had worked hard to find very special stories rooted in her tradition.

Her recollection brought that evening back to me. People were gathering in the circle as Mussarat and her three friends entered the sanctuary. We welcomed them, asking them to "come join the circle." With smiles and nods they took their places, replying "Thank you, but we've just come to listen, not to tell." We assured them that was fine. After prayer, Carol, our facilitator, shared her research on storytelling in the Islamic tradition, then told a tale she had prepared. "Oh, my father told me that story when I was a little girl," Mussarat remarked. She went on to explain the spiritual significance of the *hajj* (pilgrimage), which figures in this tale, and gave a wonderfully moving account of her last trip to Mecca. After Carol's next story, one of Mussarat's friends said, "I know that story, but my version is a bit different," and she shared hers with us.

One after another, our storytellers offered Muslim tales, and the Muslim women responded in kind. "Ah, the stories are wielding their power," I thought—breaking down barriers, opening minds and hearts to share.

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July 1944. At sundown, Russian infantry marched into the village of Grabowka. The neighbors and I rushed to the fence to look at the soldiers. We offered them water, which they were desperate for, but their sergeant ordered them to keep marching. Finally, freedom had come for Mania and me, but for the rest of our family, it was too late.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, a fourth-century bishop, theologian, and patron of St. Gregory's Church, saw life as unending progress towards discovering God at work among humanity, and sin as refusal to keep growing in this discovery. In this journal, which takes its name from his writings, we aim to further Gregory's vision by featuring two kinds of work:

- ⊕ essays on liturgy and church practice, focusing on fresh and ancient approaches to corporate worship that honor human experience as an opening to God;
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This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because we fear punishment, like slaves; not to do good because we expect repayment, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by enforcing some business deal. On the contrary, disregarding all those good things which we do hope for and which God has promised us, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

INTO THE HEART OF THE OTHER Continued from page 13

Mussarat concluded her anniversary remembrance by saying, "Of all the interfaith activities I have been involved in over the years, this seems to be the one that gets to your heart. You can really feel each others' spiritualities."

And on and on the sharing went. We videotaped our anniversary circle, and I will show the tape this summer as part of a presentation at the National Storytelling Conference. Many storytellers around the country—some of them members of NSN's new interfaith discussion group and list-serve—have expressed an interest in forming interfaith circles in their communities. These tellers are sharing and encouraging my current dream: that one day there will be interfaith story circles such as ours scattered throughout our country, perhaps throughout the world.

Gert Johnson, a member of St. John the Baptist Church in Schenectady, New York, is the founder and coordinator of Interfaith Story Circle of the Tri-City Area. She is a retired 30-year teacher of religious studies, a presenter of workshops on the use of storytelling for religious education and creative church ministry at the local and national levels, and a teller of tales in classroom and spiritual settings. Contact her at 518-374-0637 or grsjohnson@aol.com for more information about interfaith storytelling.

MIDRASH Continued from page 9

us to accept what no logical argument could prove: that Jesus' faithful followers must spread his good news among pagans as well as Jews. If Mark seems at first to make Jesus a fool or a moral wretch, he expects us to recognize that convention and recall its theological associations. The true butt of his story is not its fictional Jesus but Mark's real contemporary opponents, who hold that the heathen cannot share a Jewish messiah's salvation.

Mark's halakah excels in faithfulness to Jesus' distinctive message, neither twisting nor redirecting the parable Luke presents us but applying it powerfully to a question Jesus himself may not have foreseen. Let the modern preacher, fortified by historical and literary critical scholarship, go and do likewise.

Founding rector of St Gregory's, Rick Fabian takes time off from his vocations of snowboarding, swimming, cycling, and harpsichord playing to serve as presbyter and deacon there. He taught New Testament and liturgy at the California School for Deacons until 1999 and is a member of the North American Academy of Liturgy, Societas Liturgica, and the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation. He has led courses at St. Gregory's and the San Francisco Zen Center on the teaching of Jesus and Paul.



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