

Webinar: Why Stories Matter

I recently watched my ten-year-old granddaughter come alive – she was taken up inside a story. For several weeks she was consumed reading the whole *Harry Potter* series as she entered a world created by a story. Jane and I sat around the dinner table with friends, two of whom are recent arrivals to Canada as refugees from Syria. We listened, again, and were moved deeply, by the stories of a mother and daughter who had escaped bombings, lost a husband/father and wrestled with questions of faith. It is stories that transform our lives. Marilynne Robinson in *Absence of Mind*^[1] argues that we have largely given over the awareness of our lives to experts and so-called professionals who, so the reasoning goes, because of their training, expertise and degrees, know our minds. We have handed over our common-sense about life to these others, these experts. We are a culture characterized by absence of mind. The instincts and truth that lie within and among us in our everyday lives have fallen silent. Our default is to look to experts and professionals. We turn to them on TV (Dr. Oz and a host of other such people) or attend to experts on ‘relationships’ about how to raise our children or have a friend.

This is happening all the time in our churches and the denominations. As the crises of these organizations increase and, with it, people’s anxieties, the default to experts only hides the deeper problem – we have lost our capacities to nurture and listen to the stories that are among us as ordinary people. I was reminded of this when I read Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*.^[2] Simpson is a writer, university teacher and a member of the Alderville First Nation band. She is Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. I describe her in this way because who she is and how she works is very much connected to Marilynne Robinson’s point. Simpson got a Ph.D. and became a university teacher. She realized that she was increasingly shaped by the abstractive skills of the expert. Inside this recognition she returned to her local tribal community where, for several years, she placed herself under the guidance of the Elders of her tribe. Those Elders took Simpson out into the land, telling the ancient stories of her people and their land. It was in these stories about the wonder of the ordinary and everyday rhythms of people and land that she learned not only a wisdom that was beyond scope of experts but a way of living, a resistance that gave her a way of being within a society shaped to crush her people’s story.

This is what stories do. Like those Elders, we have to discover, again, how to share and listen to the stories buried, and often lost, within us. As God’s people we believe it is within such stories that the Spirit is fermenting imagination and life. It is these stories that need to be connected to God’s big story shaped in the Scriptures. But in our churches, today, we live within an absence of mind that continually turns to experts and professionals for answers. In so doing we (the collective not the individual) fail to see where the Spirit is at work. That is why we try one program after another only to be disappointed. Evoking story is an art; it’s a practice that invites us to trust again that the Spirit really is among us. In this interview, recorded from a webinar on 8th March, Suzanne Willian shares her experience of discovering the power of story. Listen in – it’s a way of reclaiming the reality of what God is bubbling under the surface of all our plans, assessments and programs.

[1] Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (Yale University Press, 2011).

[2] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota, 2017).