

TELL ME A STORY: HEALING LIFE'S WOUNDS

By MICHAEL GALVAN

THE OHLONE believed that they had lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for all time. When they encountered Spanish explorers and missionaries in the latter half of the eighteenth century, they did so with great warmth and hospitality. During the next hundred years, however, due to a number of reasons—illness, brutality of soldiers—the Ohlone witnessed the destruction of their way of life.

My grandmother was one of the last of the Ohlone to live in one of our villages. During various conversations which we had, she reminded me how all of our villages were lost in the distant past and how she had forgotten almost all of the Ohlone language. Although most of our Ohlone civilization had disappeared, my grandmother lived a life of great serenity and integrity. As I was growing up, she told me to place my life and my concerns into proper perspective. I had to learn how to see clearly.

I remember a drive we had taken years ago when we went by places where she had played as a young girl. With a certain peace, she pointed out a tree under which she and her older brother had played. She had wonderful living memories. In some way, she had healed, reconciled our tribal death in her own life. Death did not bring an end to life but rather death expressed a great mystery about life. I realized that if I could understand her life-story, new light would shine on the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

This article will explore how we can heal our past wounds and our faith history. Such a healing requires an experience of conversion and reconciliation. We will argue that an experience of conversion rises out of the context of a person's life-story. Our life-stories create autobiographies and biographies. When we can help a person place his or her story into the story of the saints and of Jesus, conversion and reconciliation take place. This experience can be seen in the lives of Catholics who are returning to the

Church. We will listen to two people's stories of how their past wounds were healed. Finally, we will examine how the Native American Prayer in Six Directions can help all of us experience such healing.

In an experience of conversion and reconciliation, two human movements can be distinguished: first, the healing of past wounds, the turning from past life-styles; and second, the turning toward a new life. My understanding of this conversion-reconciliation experience rises out of my pastoral ministry. Ministry has provided the context for my theological reflections. How I understand the human person will create my understanding of human conversion.

When I spoke to my Ohlone grandmother, her peace rose out of her whole life and not one action or decision. To appreciate her reconciliation, I needed to appreciate her life-story. In the work I have done with Roman Catholics who are attempting to reconcile with the Church, they have said that 'going to confession' did not provide them with an experience of reconciliation. Confession meant a list of things they had done or had not done. For conversion and reconciliation, they needed to have their whole lives healed.

Their sentiments forced me to reflect on how I experience myself or another human person. Whenever I have met new people, I have always felt that the brief introductions which we make lack something. I cannot express myself in a few nouns and adjectives: Ohlone, diocesan priest, pastor. Those words do describe me but they do not contain me. I need to understand not only a sum of facts about myself but my whole life. In other words, to understand myself, I need to articulate my life-story. To understand other people, I need to understand their life-stories. These life-stories manifest a narrative quality to human experience.

In a very helpful article, Stephen Crites develops the idea that the formal quality of human experience expresses itself in the form of narrative.¹ He writes that both narrative style and musical style give a certain coherence to temporality. For example, when we listen to a piece of music, we do not hear all the notes at one time but rather over a period of time. The arrangement of the notes reveals a certain musical style. In the same way, when we look at a person's life, we do not understand a person through one event but rather through a person's lifetime. A person's lifetime reveals his/her style. Without this temporal sequence, the style could not be revealed.

An action is altogether temporal. Yet it has a unity of form through time, a form revealed only in the action as a whole. That temporal form is what we mean by style. My gait has a particular style—an ungainly one, as it happens, of a sort developed in walking through cornfields. But you could not detect it in a still photograph, because the style is in the movement.²

Without understanding all of my grandmother's life, one could think that she had lived a sad and bitter life. Her life-story, however, revealed an experience of reconciling failure, of achieving integrity. Only when we situate her statements in the temporal frame of her life, can we understand her style. Her style allows us to interpret her words, her actions.

In a similar fashion, when someone seeks to reconcile with the ecclesial community, we need to understand that person's style. Thus, the experience of reconciliation deals with Church, with family, with self, with the whole of one's life: past, present and future. Reconciliation occurs in the midst of a person's relationships and not solely on the level of isolated deeds or omissions.

Attention to narrative rather than to individual acts provides the key to understanding the individual person.³ When one examines this narrative, one perceives a 'story' which Stanley Hauerwas defines as a 'narrative account that binds events and agents together in an intelligible pattern'.⁴ Each story helps to form and shape the person. Moreover, the story does not simply repeat the past but fosters individual growth. The validity of one's story can be determined by whether or not it releases the person from destructive alternatives, current distortions and violence, and urges him or her toward transcendence.⁵ The human capacity for self-determination depends on one's ability to focus on a certain description of self and to carry out concomitant actions. The experience of conversion and reconciliation depends on this capacity for self-determination.

In attending to a person's life-story, one can discover images and symbols which converge in a particular person and which help to form that individual's characteristic vision. These images do not constitute a peripheral element of one's faith; they constitute an essential element of faith. When we pay attention to the human person, we become aware of these key images, visions, in an individual's actions and words.

These images, visions, are often expressed through the literary media of biography and autobiography. Both biography and autobiography contend that the life-story which they are relating has

value. Both of these literary forms are written from the viewpoint of meaning. The purpose for composing such texts consists not only in the recounting of chronological data, but also in the attempt to bring the reader into an experience of *kairos*. *Kairos* stands for time which has meaning and purpose. This differs from *chronos* which signifies the passage of time as simply one event happening after another. As a result, these events do not need to relate to one another and thus often do not have any significant meaning or purpose. While autobiography attempts to bring the reader into *kairos* with the author's experience, biography attempts to bring the reader into *kairos* with the person who is being written about. Lawrence Cunningham illustrates this point in his discussion of the cult of saints in western Christianity:

The saints serve more than a symbolic function to sum up an age or give expression to a historical period. It is possible for a serious scholar or an inspired literary artist to recreate, from the stuff of a saint's life or thought, a rather complete picture of the saint's own time or insights that might aid in the search for spiritual understanding in a later period.⁶

Biographies of saints perform a specific function for believers. Such stories can illustrate our own life-stories. They present new and diverse images of how we can re-present the character of Christ. In such a way, the Christian life does not remain locked in the distant past.⁷

The importance of these saints in the life of the Church manifests itself in the desire of ethnic groups, national bodies and religious communities to have some of their deceased members canonized. The person of the saint not only expresses the possibility of living out the gospel message but also gives value to one's identity.

Certain individuals by their death (and life) help to form the identity of a community by being models of Christ himself. They approximate the Christian mystery in a specific way which relates to a local community and so are aids in inserting that community into the mystery of Christ.⁸

These functions are evidenced in the great desire among Native Americans for the canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha. Kateri's canonization will state not only the possibility of the Christian life for Native Americans but also the institutional Church's acceptance of Native American traditions.

Autobiography, in a similar fashion, tries to share a person's insights and graced experiences with others. In this sharing, the autobiographer also attempts to arrive at some self-understanding in his or her life-story. In the autobiographical act, Louis Cameli argues that the author anticipates death. The writing of the autobiography does not bring life to its end, but rather gives meaning to its process.⁹ For the reader to appreciate the value of autobiography, however, requires critical reading. Only then may we benefit from another person's story.

Cameli finds three beneficial results from reading Christian autobiographies. First, the reader constructs an understanding of Christian spirituality in an inductive fashion—from a person's life rather than from a set of principles applied to a human life. Second, the reader learns to listen more attentively to him/herself and to others through the skills developed in attentive reading. Third, the reader develops skills in articulating his/her own story.

Robert McAfee Brown finds that this ability to learn from another's story extends beyond the literary form of autobiography. The interplay between my story and another's story creates a mixture of similarity and dissimilarity. How then do we enter into these stories? Brown states that this entrance can happen in five different ways. First, I can compare my story to another's. Second, the other's story can become my own through my hearing it or by my telling of it. Third, I can analyze how some of my friends, my contemporaries, relate their stories to this particular story. Fourth, I can enter the story in a communal setting, such as in liturgy or in a group re-enactment of the story. Fifth, the story can challenge me to change my story.¹⁰

For John Dunne, this last possibility appears as one of the most important. We must ask ourselves not only how the stories of others shape us, but also whether or not we want to be shaped by these stories. Dunne describes this dialogue as 'passing over':

Passing over is the way a man discovers the shape of the life story in other ages, the story of deeds, and the story of experience, and coming back from this to his own time is how he discovers by contrast its current shape, the story of appropriation.¹¹

For Dunne, humans have the possibility to pass over from one standpoint to another standpoint. At times, however, we refuse the possibility or circumstances could prevent us from exercising the possibility.

As Christians, the story of Jesus tells the story to which we attempt to pass over. In this process, we discover ourselves in the story of Jesus. Since Jesus lived through human life and death, his story enables us to find meaning in life and death. Jesus' death does not mean the end of life, but an openness to a transformed life. This resurrection of Jesus gives meaning to our own life and death.

For Michael Goldberg, the Christian story of Jesus relates a story of reconciliation, while the Jewish story speaks of a world still waiting for reconciliation. This movement from confession to reconciliation to transformation characterizes the Christian story and makes the Christian story unique.¹² In this process of passing over, one actualizes the past so that its redemptive qualities and significance exercise an influence upon the present situation. Any human embodiment of the story of Jesus, however, relates an interpretation which we need to view as provisional. No one interpretation gives us the final and ultimate meaning of the text.¹³

For Christians, the story of Jesus is unlike any other story. The unique quality of the story of Jesus rises out of the experience of Incarnation. For the experience of Jesus in people's lives reveals the healing, loving, presence of God. God's incarnate self in our life-stories creates a particular meaning. Since the story of Jesus reveals the story of the Incarnation, it exists as the normative story for Christians.

The experience of transformation, of conversion, revolves around a faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The gospels call us to leave our former way of life and to be transformed by the mystery of Jesus. When we respond to this gospel call, we surrender ourselves to a life of continual turning toward the Lord. This conversion bases itself on the mutual love of Christ and the Christian. While conversion includes a repentance of sins and an acceptance of mercy, it does not end there. As Bernard Häring states, conversion manifests a 'new relationship with God, a homecoming, a being with him who is Emmanuel, God-with-us.'¹⁴ The image of conversions consists of a coming home from a journey. Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Peter, Paul and the disciples all set out on journeys in response to God's call. We find that both the Old Testament and the New Testament ground themselves in their respective dominant journeys: the Exodus and the death-resurrection-ascension of the Lord.

The biblical travel stories follow a particular pattern: home, losing home and homecoming.¹⁵ When God calls, we answer by leaving our home. Abraham leaves the home of his ancestors; the apostles give up mother, father and home. The journey disrupts our sedate lives. We find ourselves wandering with the Israelites through the Sinai, with Jesus who has no place to lay his head. We do not accomplish the journey by ourselves. We find support from our community, and we ground our discipline in a remembrance of the past saving deeds of God. This remembering enables us to live in the present. When we remember God's past saving deeds, we can trust again. As Christians, we call this memory of our common story 'tradition'.

Tradition can be described as the orientation of meaning toward the future, a cognitive and affective disposition that enables us to find meaning for our future action by reflection upon our experience.¹⁶

Tradition links us through time to past generations and to generations yet to come. The memory of past encounters calls us to live out those memories' consequences. Conversion depends on memory to explain the present and thus gives us hope to move into the future. For Christians, this conversion centres on the Lord Jesus who began his ministry by calling Israel to conversion.¹⁷ This conversion includes repentance, acceptance of God's mercy and entrance into a new life with the Lord. Jesus called his disciples to this conversion, and continues to call us to respond in the same way.

In working with alienated and returning Catholics, I have found that the principal task consists of helping them experience conversion. Conversion can happen if these returning Catholics can pass over to the story of Jesus, to the stories of the saints, and make these stories their own stories.

These returning Catholics often have questions which converts to Christianity do not have. Past memories of hurt need to experience healing. Some returnees need to see that things have changed. They may express this in such statements as 'I do not want to return to the same Church I left', or 'I remember that we used to be taught . . .' Thus, the returnee's conversion will also contain a reconciliation of his/her past with the present and the future. A new meaning will give new coherence to the returnee's life-story.

The experience of one of these returning Catholics at St Francis de Sales Cathedral in Oakland, California can illustrate this conversion experience. Terry was a single parent who was in her early 40s. She had moved to California from the East Coast. While she had been raised a Roman Catholic, she had left the Church in her early 20s. Her educational interests had led her through philosophy and social reform. She had been with the Catholic Worker House in New York and had done union organizing. Her concern with workers' rights had caused her to study the thought of Mao Tse-Tung. In fact, she had gone to China to study Mao's vision. In all of her journey, however, she had always had a certain hunger for a spiritual dimension in her life.

At first, she hesitated about returning to the Roman Catholic Church. After all, she had left it partially out of its lack of commitment to work in the area of social justice. On a retreat, however, a Jesuit director had asked her to consider if she might want to return to the Church. Someone had suggested the cathedral as a possible place to worship. She came to liturgy at St Francis de Sales and found a certain fulfillment. Soon, she called me and we began to reflect and pray over her spiritual journey. Her greatest questions concerned the relationship of Christian love and social justice. Did Christian love abandon people to economic oppression? Could the ministry of justice have a more loving, gentle face? For many months, she struggled with these issues. Over the time, she came to believe that Christian love impelled a person to work for justice. Her principles had been reconciled with her spiritual need. With this new understanding, she redefined her relationship with the Church and returned. Terry has since returned to school to earn a graduate degree in theology. Her hope is to minister within the Church. Terry's journey manifests that the journey of faith extends over a period of time and heals and reconciles one's past with the present and the future.

A healing of one's faith history may entail one's own self-perception. This past year I had the privilege of renewing a friendship with a seminary high schoolmate. His name was Steve and his sister-in-law had called me. Steve had AIDS and wanted to ready himself for death. When I met him again, we shared stories of our high school days and asked questions about the various people each had kept in touch with. When we began to speak of faith, he shared his desire, his need to believe again. He wanted to have that strong confident faith of his younger days.

He had wandered away from Church, from God, because he felt oppressed and rejected by the Church since he was gay. Over and over, he said he wanted to believe again—but not in a God who oppressed him but in a God who liberated him.

The journey was a hard one and I did not know if Steve would reach home before he died. Once he asked me with much frustration why I could believe and he could not. I did not know what to share. So I asked him about a crucifix he had on the wall. He told me something incredible. No, it was not of Jesus. It was of himself instead. His life had been a crucifixion and he wanted to get down off his cross. How could he get off? I sat in silence, in sharing a deep wound. Something drove me to ask Steve where Jesus was. After a deep pause, Steve told me that Jesus had climbed up unto the cross with him. We could only be quiet with one another. An experience of healing had happened. Amazingly, Steve died two days later. He had arrived home. God did not oppress him or reject him but God suffered with him.

For Terry and Steve, the experience of healing their faith history enabled them to move into the future. For my grandmother and for many Native Americans that same healing comes out of their prayer lives, out of remembering who we are. This memory is expressed in the Prayer in Six Directions. In an unhurried fashion, one greets the six directions in prayer. We turn to the east and face the rising sun. God is praised for the gift of new life, of new days, of youth, of beginnings. Turning toward the south, thanks are given for those people, events and things which warm our lives and help us to grow and develop. The sun sets in the west and so we praise God for sunsets, nights, for the endings in our lives. As we face the north, we remember the challenges and difficulties of life. Bending down to touch mother earth, we praise the Creator for the things which sustain our lives. Finally, as we gaze into the sky, we thank God for our hopes and dreams. Centred in the Creator's universe, we remember God's mighty deeds in our lives and can thus move into the future.

As Roman Catholics, as Native Americans, as humans, we all want and need such a centredness. We need to redefine our life-stories in the story of the death-resurrection-ascension of the Lord. When we can do so, we can heal our past wounds and failures. Our faith history becomes one of salvation and not of failure and abandonment. We can, as my grandmother urged me, see clearly.

NOTES

¹ Crites, Stephen: 'The narrative quality of experience' in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971) pp 291-311.

² *Ibid.*, p 292.

³ Hauerwas, Stanley; Bondi, Edward and Burrell, David: *Truthfulness and tragedy: further investigations into Christian ethics* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 35.

⁶ Cunningham, Lawrence S.: *The meaning of saints* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1980), p 145.

⁷ McCledon, James William: *Biography as theology: how life stories remake today's theology* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1974), p 38.

⁸ Baldwin, John: 'On feasting the saints', *Worship* 54 (1980), pp 337-338.

⁹ Cameli, Louis John: *Stories of Paradise: classical and modern autobiographies of faith* (Ramsey, Paulist Press, 1978), p 19.

¹⁰ McAfee Brown, Robert: 'My story and "the story"' in *Theology today* 32 (July, 1975), pp 166-173.

¹¹ Dunne, John S.: *A search for God in time and memory* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1970), p xi.

¹² Goldberg, Michael: *Theology and narrative: a critical introduction* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1982), p 133. For a fuller discussion of the Jewish and Christian stories, consult Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: getting our stories straight* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1985).

¹³ Stroup, George W.: *The promise of narrative theology: recovering the gospel in the Church* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981), pp 167-169.

¹⁴ Häring, Bernard: *Free and faithful in Christ*, vol 1 (New York, The Seabury Press, 1978), p 418.

¹⁵ Navone, John: *Towards a theology of story* (Slough, St Paul Publications, 1977), p 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 60.

¹⁷ Mark 1, 14-15.