

# SECTION 1

## THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE:

### *Editor's Introduction*

The “narrative perspective” has been employed in theological circles in the West for the last 30 years. Its roots can be traced to the historical critical study of Hebrew and Christian scriptures that focused our attention on the dynamics of myths and parables and on form criticism. It also appeared in biblical theology when theologians focused on the larger salvation story (a narrative). Yet, a broader interfaith perspective makes it equally clear that for most of the world’s religions, stories are very important and very central. Each religion’s primary literature is often conveyed through myths and stories. There are stories told by particular religions’ visionary founders, such as Moses, Jesus, Buddha, or Muhammad. There are also stories about these “visionaries” themselves. Stories have been the vehicles for the communication of great spiritual truths. Stories have a way of communicating spiritual truths that are otherwise too paradoxical or too intuitive to describe in words or systematic thought. The emergence of narrative theology as a vital and creative lens for theological inquiry, stands in contrast to systematic theology that has held prominence in the West.

In the 1990’s the narrative perspective entered the world of psychotherapy with the pioneering writing of Michael White and David Epston. Drawing on the emerging post modern philosophies of the time, they fashioned an approach to therapy that focused on the stories people tell about themselves, their lives, and their world. They believed that by focusing on the stories that shape our lives, care givers can invite people to reflect on those stories, examine their assumptions and cultural origins, in order to empower them to rewrite their stories in “preferred” or I would say, life-giving ways. Narrative theory and therapy have had a major impact upon pastoral care and counseling. In my estimation, narrative therapy has become the dominant theoretical model for the work of pastoral counseling in the mainline Protestant community in the United States and among the global pastoral care community. Such major figures in the world of pastoral care and counseling, as Andrew Lester, Christie Neuger, Herbert Anderson, Car-



rie Doehring, Edward Wimberley, Archie Smith, Jr., and others have championed this model for pastoral care in the 21st century.

Even with a growing emphasis on narrative theory and therapy, I am not aware of major contributions from this perspective that address the impact of a narrative perspective upon the theory and practice of pastoral supervision and spiritual formation. In selecting "The Narrative Perspective" as the theme for the 2015 issue of *Reflective Practice*, the Editorial Board invites dialogue, discussion and reflection upon how narrative theory and therapy impact how we do supervision, training, spiritual formation and the education of religious professionals.

We are delighted to begin the discussion with an essay by a leading figure who has brought narrative theory and therapy to pastoral theology and therapy, Christie Conrad Neuger, who most of you may know through her book, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Fortress, 2001). Neuger provides us with some helpful background to and clarification of the central concepts and themes of narrative theory, and then discusses many of the methods of supervision that are unique to narrative therapists. Then, Suzanne M. Coyle, of Christian Theological Seminary, describes her work on "call stories." Most of us are well aware that seminarians often describe their sense of calling to a religious vocation via a story, what Suzanne terms, a "call story." Coyle, drawing on her new book, *Uncovering Spiritual Stories*, explores how narrative therapy might provide a framework for working with call stories. In particular, she describes a program called, "Call by Spirit," in which she employed various narrative techniques to help students discern their call.

Chrissy Zaker, Director of Field Education at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, shifts the discussion slightly by focusing our attention upon a particular kind of story, the parable. She describes the essential features of a parable and its dynamic, and then suggests that it might be a lens through which we could view clients, students and patients. Next, Georgia Gojmerac-Leiner, who has worked until recently as a Catholic chaplain, invites us to listen to the stories of others with a "therapeutic ear." She invites us to listen to and use stories and storying as a means to facilitate healing in health care settings. Finally, Lynette Dungan, from the Sentir Graduate School of Spirituality in Australia reminds us that narrative is not just a subject, but also a method. Her essay uses a personal narrative as an inquiry

into the nature of good supervision, particularly with spiritual care providers. She writes from the discipline of spiritual direction, and her uses of poetry and self-disclosure to speak from that orientation, as she dialogues with the larger body of research on supervision from an array of professional disciplines.

But how could we talk about stories without having a few stories sprinkled into this section! With permission of the author, Carroll E. Arkeima, a pastoral psychotherapist from New York, I have selected a few of my favorites from his new book, *Beyond Me: Poems about Spirit in Scripture, Psychotherapy and Life*. (Resource, 2014).

I hope you enjoy this rich and thoughtful collection of essays upon the theme, "The Narrative Perspective." May it help you identify, change and celebrate the stories of your life and ministry.

Scott Sullender,  
Editor