

Developing a Spirit of Compassion: Preparing for Social Justice Work Using Digital Storytelling

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Abstract. Digital storytelling (DS) engenders a spirit of compassion that helps prepare people for social justice work. Like other forms of storytelling, which have contributed to social change movements, DS encourages personal voice, deep listening, and contemplative awareness. Further, by incorporating visual and audio layers, DS has heightened potential to lead to positive change as audiences are moved by the stories. DS can be used to make social justice claims, as well as to assist people in developing skills necessary for social justice work within and beyond their faith communities.

On this Thursday evening at Maternity of Mary Catholic Church, the social justice committee meeting runs as usual until the end, when Mark, a father of two young children, gets agitated. He wants to know why he is often the only parishioner who attends the Friday prayer service outside a local Planned Parenthood clinic. As he sees it, protecting the sanctity of life is the signal responsibility of Catholic social justice work and the reason he got involved with the committee in the first place. He concludes, “I am tired of feeling like I am the only one who cares about this.” In response, Kathy, a member of the committee for over thirty years, wonders aloud how anyone can prioritize praying at Planned Parenthood when their parish has been so little involved in immigration issues in their city, protesting the proposed state amendment to require photographic identification for voters, and the local pro-peace movement. As Kathy spews forth her list of worthy concerns, in the back row, Sheila leans over to Mike, rolls her eyes, and whispers, “There goes Kathy again! I wish she would keep all of her politics out of this. We are strapped as it is trying to staff Families Moving Forward for this next cycle.”

The effects of this discontent can be seen after the meeting. Mark and his wife stand apart from the group, feeling underappreciated and misunderstood. A few people shake Kathy's hand, thanking her for voicing what they have long been thinking. However, the majority of people put their heads down and duck out quickly, hoping to avoid further controversy. A long-implicit fracture has surfaced this evening, and the committee chair is concerned by what she sees as a lack of compassion among its members.

In this paper, I argue that digital storytelling engenders a spirit of compassion, a spirit that could help repair the fracture at Maternity of Mary and further prepare people for their social justice ministries. First, I outline a digital storytelling process to be used in relation to social justice work; second, I justify the thesis that digital storytelling fosters a spirit of compassion; and finally, I offer specific suggestions for how to employ digital storytelling in faith communities to build relationships based in mutuality and compassion and to further the cause of justice.

Digital Storytelling for Social Justice

According to the Center for Digital Storytelling,¹ a digital story is a short, first-person, video narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music and other sounds to depict a moment of change.² In digital storytelling, the *process* of telling, listening, and revising stories is just as important as the final product, as it is through the process that personal voice, the skill of deep listening, and a sense of empathy for self and other can be developed. Below I outline five aspects of digital storytelling for social justice work using the Maternity of Mary case introduced above to illustrate the aspects.³

1. *Story Excavating*: Here participants "dig up" their own stories with the purpose of discovering the story that they need to tell. Participants need to be encouraged not to censor themselves during excavation and to follow where their mind and hearts take them.⁴ One excavation tool is to ask participants to find photographs, other artifacts, and sounds that relate to the topic at hand. Free writing exercises, where participants spend a set amount of time writing whatever comes to mind in response to a writing prompt, are another excellent way to trigger the mining of personal stories. Members of Maternity of Mary's social justice committee could begin by finding images that signify their inspiration for social justice, roadblocks to social justice, and their hopes and dreams for a more just world and do free writing about an experience that opened their eyes to a particular issue of social justice.
2. *Story Sharing*: Next each participant has a turn to share his or her story with a small group in a story circle.⁵ As the story is read, the rest of the group practices deep listening,

¹ In the 1990s, the Center for Digital Storytelling developed a now-classic process of digital storytelling. For more on the history of the Center for Digital Storytelling, see Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2009) 1-10 and the Center for Digital Storytelling, "History," <http://www.storycenter.org/history/> (accessed September 13, 2012).

² Center for Digital Storytelling, "What We Do," <http://www.storycenter.org/what-we-do/> (accessed September 13, 2012). According to Daniel Weinshenker, Rocky Mountain/Midwest Regional Director of Center for Digital Storytelling, stories depict change moments, which fall into one of two basic story forms. In the first form, a stranger comes to town, that is, change comes to you. In the second form, you go on vacation, that is, you move toward change. Daniel Weinshenker, Digital Storytelling Workshop conducted for members of the Religious Education Association, Denver, Colorado, November 2010.

³ Informing these five aspects are, most specifically, Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*; Lyn Schofield Clark and Mary Hess, *Storying Faith: Digital Storytelling as Faith Formation*, <http://www.storyingfaith.org/> (accessed April 15, 2012); and Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005). Also influential because of their emphasis on storytelling are Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); and Frank Rogers Jr., *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011).

⁴ This is true even if the story's connection to the topic at hand is not readily apparent. Oftentimes the story that a person needs to tell is the one that emerges, and its connection to the topic may become apparent later in the process.

⁵ In practice, it is useful if participants have a written narrative from which to share. This can help lessen the participant's anxiety about sharing and assist the sharer in staying on topic. Participants also then have a text from which to work when it comes to revising and producing the digital product.

bracketing what the story brings up for them and attending to what the story is about, not only on an obvious level (who are the main characters, where does the action take place), but also on an emotional and symbolic level. By asking the author honest questions, the listeners help the author connect with the authentic emotions and central event that are at the heart of the story.⁶ Crucial to the success of story sharing is insuring that each participant has a chance to be heard by actively promoting empathetic and appreciative listening, room for silence, and authentic questions that keep the focus on the story the author shares. At Maternity of Mary, in small groups purposely assigned so that members do not work only with those toward whom they naturally gravitate, the participants would share one of their stories that arose from the image gathering or free-writing in the excavating process.

3. *Story Linking*: Then participants consider how their stories reflect, challenge, revise, and expand the stories and practices of their faith tradition and their extra-religious cultures.⁷ In Christian contexts, particularly important is linking to the scriptural narrative of prophetic challenges to social injustice. Ideally participants come to see their story not as isolated but rather as connected to and sustained by a living history of justice, a history in which God is active. Pragmatically speaking, story linking can happen in numerous ways; contemplation, artistic and embodied reflection, the reading of scripture, and input from facilitators in the form of music, film, or other media (which showcase strands of Christian and other important and relevant cultural narratives) stimulates story linking. With the hope of assisting the Maternity of Mary group in reconnecting with a common basis for their work and prayerfully beginning to embrace their differences, they could be led through *lectio divina* (sacred reading) with a biblical text that speaks to the biblical, prophetic mandate to do justice, such as Micah 6:8, Matthew 25: 31-46, or Luke 4:18-19.⁸
4. *Story Producing*: Now the “digital” aspect finally comes into the process, as participants revise their written narrative, based on story sharing and story linking, and record a spoken version of it using a program such as iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Participants then design additional layers of the digital story, using images and other sounds (ambient noises, instrumental or vocal songs, etc.). Emphasizing simplicity supports the participants’ ability to complete the steps of producing. Often participants are tempted to include literal images and sounds; these are helpful inasmuch as they convey details of a story. Facilitators and fellow participants also can encourage each other to consider how implicit or juxtaposed images and sounds can be employed to

⁶ Certainly a person’s story may have more than one event in it. However, since a digital story is not a life story but is rather a short and focused slice of life focusing on a moment of change, the Center for Digital Storytelling encourages participants to isolate one specific moment of change around which the story revolves.

⁷ By extra-religious cultures, I mean to indicate cultures (other than their faith community) of which people are a part, such as a culture of a nation-state, a culture of an ethnic group, a culture of mass media, etc.

⁸ Instructions for conducting *lectio divina* can be found in Claire Bischoff and Joan Mitchell, *Faith Sharing with Teens: How-to Guide for Catechists and Parents*, 2nd ed. (Saint Paul, MN: Good Ground Press, 2011) 64-66.

reflect the complexity of a story and the story's connection to broader religious and cultural narratives. During this aspect, Maternity of Mary participants would work individually to construct their digital stories.

5. *Story Screening*: A final aspect of the digital storytelling process is a celebration of the work that has been accomplished through a screening of the short films that have been produced for the entire group.⁹ While the first screening should take place within the group itself, it is also worthwhile to think about potential audiences beyond the immediate group, such as the broader faith community or an interested audience that could be reached by developing a website to host the stories.¹⁰ With the Maternity of Mary group, ideally the screening would be a chance for the group to build a stronger common identity, as well as to experience again the joy that is associated with working for social justice. A screening to the larger faith community would allow the social justice committee members to feel heard and may have the added benefit of inspiring new volunteers to become part of the social justice story of the parish.

Engendering a Spirit of Compassion

My enthusiasm for digital storytelling as a process to support social justice work is based on the claim that digital storytelling engenders a spirit of compassion.¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, I borrow Frank Rogers's definition of compassion as “being moved in one’s depths by the pain or bliss of another and responding in ways that intend to either ease their suffering or

⁹ Some participants may be hesitant to showcase their work, especially if they did not reach an endpoint with which they are satisfied. My experience both as a participant in and a leader of the digital storytelling process has been that sharing works in progress still results in important affirmation and a sense of accomplishment for participants, as well as contributes to the group's identity and sense of celebration.

¹⁰ I have deliberately called these parts of the digital storytelling process aspects and not steps because while they certainly can be followed in order, in practice a fluid moving back and forth between the aspects, as well as multiple uses of each of the aspects, can assist people as they discern and develop their stories and connect them to narratives from their faith tradition and other cultures. For example, story linking could be done after a first round of story sharing and then again as a concluding step after story screening.

¹¹ Mary Elizabeth Moore and I have made a similar argument with regards to the potential of oral history to engender a spirit of compassion. See Claire Bischoff and Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Cultivating a Spirit for Justice and Peace: Teaching through Oral History," *Religious Education* 102, no. 2 (2007): 151-171. Mary Hess has made a similar argument about the promise of digital storytelling to foster mirror neuron development and thus promote empathic learning in religious education. See Mary Hess, “Mirror Neurons, the Development of Empathy and Digital Storytelling,” paper presented at the REA/APPRRE annual meeting, Toronto, ONT, Canada, November 2011, <http://www.religiouseducation.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/RIG1.7-Hess.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2012).

Further, as the editors of *Telling Stories to Change the World* argue, the beginning of the twenty-first century is a time “in which narrative is more broadly recognized than ever as a significant, simple, crucial vehicle for reawakening, disseminating, and sustaining social justice impulses.” See Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani, eds., *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 1. This edited volume collects contemporary cases from around the world of community-based efforts to use storytelling as a vehicle for working for justice.

promote their flourishing.”¹² If compassion is an “experiential gestalt,” as Rogers argues, then it can be developed and supported through specific practices.¹³ Digital storytelling is such a practice; participating in the digital storytelling process has the potential to evoke the contemplative awareness, empathic care, all-accepting presence, desire for flourishing, and restorative action that Rogers sees as constitutive of authentic compassion.¹⁴

First, like other forms of storytelling, which have played a critical role in social change movements such as the Civil Rights movement,¹⁵ digital storytelling encourages personal voice and compassion for the self.¹⁶ As Rogers eloquently argues, personal compassion and restoration is intimately connected to social compassion and restoration, because a person needs to be grounded in their own “empowered clarity” in order to practice compassionate action toward others.¹⁷ As participants excavate their stories and work cooperatively to clarify them through story sharing and connect them to religious and cultural narratives through story linking, they are empowered by the discovery that they have a story to share and the knowledge that they are human subjects capable of critical thought and critical, restorative action.¹⁸ Further, by responding to questions about one's story, producing it using additional layers of images and sound, viewing it as a finish product, and seeing it through the eyes of others in the group, participants are able to stand apart from their own stories in order to experience compassion for themselves in a way that may not have been possible in the past.

¹² Frank Rogers Jr., "Compassion-based Practices of Personal and Social Restoration," *Practical Matters* 5 (2009), <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/5/centerpieces/compassion-based-practices-of-personal-and-social-restoration> (accessed September 16, 2012).

¹³ *Ibid.* At the end of his piece, Rogers details the “Compassion Practice,” a contemplative practice that nurtures compassion both for one's self and for others, even those with whom we are in enmity.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ As historian Rickie Solinger puts it, the 1960s Civil Rights movement in the United States was “a golden moment when people in community felt empowered, partly because they were able to generate a coherent and convincing narrative of freedom.” See Solinger, et al., *Telling Stories*, 3.

Of course, the place of storytelling in social change movements is not only historical. For instance in *Telling Stories*, Solinger, et al. collect essays about contemporary attempts from around the world of people “using stories as a grassroots tactic for making social justice claims.” As a more focused example, Lee Anne Bell offers a storytelling model designed to support teaching for racial justice. See Lee Anne Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁶ As Solinger, et al. claim in relation to narrative, more generally, through narrative people can claim “public voice and public space to make community-based, collective claims for their value and their rights as persons and for the forms of social justice they require to fully realize that value.” See Solinger, et al., *Telling Stories*, 1.

¹⁷ Against the argument that compassion for the self may seem indulgent in the face of violence and severe challenges to social injustice, Rogers points to the work of Desmond Tutu, who observed that social transformation begins with personal transformation in his work fighting apartheid in South Africa. See Rogers, “Compassion-based Practice.”

¹⁸ According to Paulo Freire, the ontological vocation of every human being is to become a Subject, that is, a human being who can reflect and act upon the world. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2003) 43-44.

Further, particularly through story sharing, story linking, and story screening, the digital storytelling process promotes a contemplative and compassionate awareness of others, through which we hear and perceive others in the depth of their being, rather than as a projection of our own being. Deep and empathic listening skills are practiced and developed as participants ask questions designed to help others identify the heart of their stories and link personal stories to the great narratives of their multiple faith traditions and cultures. Also, in hearing another's story, participants may find themselves moved and notice judgments falling away, as they come to know more about the circumstances that give rise to another's particular story. Through this process, respectful human relationships are built, relationships that "undergird the peace of the world," as Mary Elizabeth Moore has argued.¹⁹

Certainly, non-digital modes of storytelling foster contemplative awareness, deep listening, and empathic interaction. What sets digital storytelling apart is the incorporation of visual and audio layers to complement and add complexity to the personal narrative being told.²⁰ Digital stories become art, and art has the potential to "release the imagination," as educator Maxine Greene articulates.²¹ As the imagination is released, people make new connections, see the world as it could be but is not now, and recognize that what seem to be givens are actually contingencies toward which we can act for change.²² By provoking the imagination, digital stories exhibit a heightened potential for sparking social change, as change can only happen when we are able to envision ourselves and the world in new ways.²³

In addition to engendering compassion for self and others, digital storytelling is an important tool for social justice work in two more ways. First, as illustrated above in relation to the Maternity of Mary case, digital storytelling can build a sense of communal identity for those

¹⁹ Mary Elizabeth Moore, "The Myth of Objectivity in Public Education: Intersubjective Teaching of Religion," *Religious Education* 90, no. 2 (1995): 224.

²⁰ For more on how the digital format affects the product that is produced, see Tone Bratteteig, "Does It Matter that It Is Digital?" in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 271-283.

²¹ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

²² As educator Lee Anne Bell puts it, "The arts also unsettle what we take for granted, helping us question normative assumptions about the world." See Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, 17.

²³ Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 23. It is important to note here that there is debate about the democratic potential of digital storytelling, including concern that digital stories will stay marginal and questions about scalability, that is, whether enough digital stories can be made and can reach enough people to sustain it as a democratic practice. See Nick Couldry, "Digital Storytelling, Media Research and Democracy: Conceptual Choices and Alternative Futures," 41-60, and John Hartley, "Problems of Expertise and Scalability in Self-Made Media," 197-211, both in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). Yet even when used on a small scale, digital storytelling has the potential to make a difference in the lives of individuals and local communities. See Knut Lundby, "Introduction: Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories," in *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-Representations in New Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 4. This is also how the Center for Digital Storytelling understands digital storytelling, as a "technology of healing by a local population." See Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, xvi.

working on social justice, as participants share their stories with each other and link them to religious and cultural narratives about social justice. The relationships that are built through storytelling are “strong enough to incite the kind of risk-taking that’s required to build movements,” because these relationships are based in authenticity, respect, and mutuality.²⁴ Further, because of their digital format and ability to be shared far beyond the community in which they were created, digital stories can be utilized to recruit new social justice allies and connect social justice advocates working on similar issues in different geographic locations, thus extending the community beyond its local boundaries. As the editors of *Telling Stories for Social Justice* put it, “One person’s ordinary story, expressed through art, can resonate across boundaries.”²⁵ Produced locally but shared globally, digital stories can participate in movements and evidence power greater than themselves.

A final gift digital storytelling offers those engaged in social justice work is a reconnection to the sacred mystery that calls us to and sustains our efforts for justice.²⁶ As illustrated by the frustrations of the Maternity of Mary social justice committee, in working for social justice, people’s passion may be squelched as they encounter challenges and face the continued presence of injustice in the world. What the prophetic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have taught us is that the energy for social justice arises from and continues to be fueled by relationship with transcendent mystery.²⁷ The experience of many who have participated in digital storytelling is that of standing on holy ground. As people excavate, share, link, produce, and screen their stories, they wonder at the wisdom that emerges from themselves and others, feel connected to something beyond themselves, and sense a calling to take action based on what they have witnessed. Ultimately, digital storytelling has the power to connect people to the mysterious and transcendent ground of their being and to invigorate them for future work of bringing God’s justice to birth in the world.

Utilizing Digital Storytelling in Faith Communities

The digital storytelling process can be adapted in multiple ways in faith communities in relation to social justice work. As suggested in the first section in relation to the Maternity of Mary community, digital storytelling can be used to build community among those who work for social justice. By shifting from political arguments to personal stories, participants who have previously felt marginalized may experience being heard and respected; those who vehemently disagree with each other on the purpose of social justice work may find commonalities in their stories that allow them to work cooperatively in the future; and all participants may find themselves re-invigorated for social justice work by the wisdom and passion of the group and the working of the Spirit among them. Further, as they attend to each other’s stories, participants

²⁴ Solinger, et al., *Telling Stories*, 4.

²⁵ Solinger, et al., *Telling Stories*, 3.

²⁶ Joe Lambert, who wrote the guide on digital storytelling used by the secular Center for Digital Storytelling, also recognizes the potential of digital storytelling to incite “a truly transcendent experience.” See Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, 9.

²⁷ John F. Haught, *What Is Religion? An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 134.

develop skills of empathic listening and a stance of compassion for others, skills that are transferable to the various contexts of their social justice work. Finally, going through the digital storytelling process together creates a sense of group identity and purpose that can contribute to the process of healing and sustain the group as it continues to engage in the challenging work of social justice.

Let me also briefly suggest two other ways that the digital storytelling process can be utilized in relation to social justice concerns in faith communities. First, digital storytelling can help surface and address issues of injustice or violence that are faced by members of the community.²⁸ For instance, in order to bring greater and more personalized awareness to the proposed amendment to require photographic identification for voting, the social justice committee at Maternity of Mary could work with parishioners who may be most affected by this proposed law to create digital stories about their voting experiences, both the challenges and joys people experience through participating in the democratic process.²⁹ Second, members of faith communities can introduce the digital storytelling process as they develop relationships with communities beyond their own.³⁰ As just one example, Maternity of Mary parishioners could engage the families who are transitioning out of homeless through the Families Moving Forward program in the creation of digital stories. The families would gain a sense of voice, and parishioners and the families would build relationships on a foundation of trust, respect, and understanding. Together they may discover new and better ways to work for social justice in their communities.

²⁸ Scholar-practitioners Frank Rogers Jr. and Annie Hardison-Moody also make similar claims in relation to narratives more generally. Rogers has used storytelling to tap into the energy youth have and help them “discover and name the social issues that smolder within them, rooted as they are in their own wounds and worries.” See Rogers Jr., *Finding God in the Graffiti*, 156. Annie Hardison-Moody has employed storytelling and art to create space for Liberian women living in the United States to redeem memories of violence from the Liberian civil wars and experience the peace that emerges relationally through everyday life. See Annie Hardison-Moody, *When Religion Matters: A Feminist Practical Theology of Healing*, PhD diss., Emory University, 2012.

²⁹ Persons who are elderly, persons with disabilities, and college students—three groups of people who are most likely to be impacted by this legislation—make up a sizable portion of Maternity of Mary’s membership.

³⁰ Here I think about the implications for congregation-based social justice work of the El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City, a widely cited example of participatory action research in which Puerto Rican participants write autobiographies to share with fellow participants as part of their native-language literacy training. Because participants and researchers are connected to the program over an extended period of time, they build relationships of trust and mutuality that undergird their cooperative work to better the life situation of Puerto Ricans in New York. See Rita Benmayor, “Testimony, Action Research, and Empowerment: Puerto Rican Women and Popular Education,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991) 159-174.

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