Narrative Stances in Spiritual Direction: Hearing Others to Their Life-Giving Story
Diane M. Millis and Busshō Lahn

It was in 1971 that I received a totally new understanding of hearing,” Nelle Morton declared in her classic, *The Journey Is Home*. “It came from the lips of a most ordinary woman in a workshop I was conducting.”

Morton (1905–1987), a theologian, professor, feminist activist, and civil rights leader, recounts:

The last day of the workshop, the woman, whose name I do not know, wandered off alone. As we gathered sometime later in small groups she started to talk in a hesitant, almost awkward manner. “I hurt,” she began. “I hurt all over.” She touched herself in various places before she added, “but I don’t know where to begin to cry. I don’t know how to cry.” Hesitantly she began to talk. Then she talked more and more. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of the most excruciating pain, no one moved. No one interrupted her. No one rushed to comfort her. No one cut her experience short. We simply sat. We sat in a powerful silence. The women clustered about the weeping one went with her to the deepest part of her life as if something so sacred was taking place they did not withdraw their presence or mar its visibility. Finally the woman, whose name I did not know, finishing speaking. Tears flowed from her eyes in all directions. She spoke again: “You heard me. You heard me all the way.” Her eyes narrowed, then moved around the group again slowly as she said: “I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story. You heard me to my own speech.” (Morton, 204–5)

As spiritual companions, we aspire to hear others, to hear them all the way, to hear them to their own story, to hear them to their own speech.

In this article we—a Christian and a Zen Buddhist—offer what we as spiritual directors are learning about hearing others to their most life-giving story. This process begins with attending to “the story that holds us,” moves to constructing “the story we hold,” and culminates in awakening to the realization that “we are being held.” We will examine the key features of each of these three narrative stances and explore the role that a spiritual director can play in facilitating the movement from one stance to the next.

The Stories That Hold Us: Increasing Our Awareness of the Stories We Have Been Told and Have Not Yet Told

Our stories—the ones we tell and those we are told—shape us. Each of us is a story catcher, or more accurately, a story sponge, absorbing stories from many different sources (our family, culture, faith traditions, and the media, among others). It’s not what’s happened in our past that defines us, but the stories we attach to the past.

—Diane M. Millis, *Conversation—the Sacred Art* (39)

Each of us begins our life entering into a particular constellation of narratives. The stories we receive from our family, faith tradition(s), culture, and society become the lens through which we view reality. For the first decade or more of our lives, we are largely unconscious of the stories that hold us; we are unaware of their impact on both our identity and our agency.

Imagine being a passenger squished in the middle of the back seat of a car. You have no control as to where the car is being driven, your view of your surroundings is partial at best, and you are utterly dependent upon your fellow passengers to provide details about what there is to see. You have no realization that there are other cars in which to drive, other destinations to travel to, other passengers to travel with, and even other means of transportation! All you know is the car you have been in; all you know are the narratives recited to you as you travel. Whether the stories you are told prove helpful or harmful to your eventual outlook, they are yours and your ego is invested in them.

To extend this analogy a bit further, as we travel we not only absorb stories, we also have the capacity to tell stories. As soon as we begin to speak, we yearn to tell tales...
of what I did and what happened to me. Developing our capacity to tell stories well depends upon our innate abilities and, equally if not more importantly, on having an audience who is willing to listen. If our family and culture encourage us to relay our experiences in great detail, we gain confidence in our ability to express ourselves. If our stories go unnoticed, ignored, or suppressed, we become guarded and fearful about giving voice to them.

Many of us have felt the urgency to express the unspoken words inside our hearts, the anxiety of a truth longing to be born, seen, and acknowledged. There is no one among us who is not pregnant with a kingdom of details, characters, pains, hopes, and desires.

Spiritual direction offers a container for those who labor to give birth to the stories that are too large to be carried inside them any longer. We as spiritual directors have the privilege of serving as midwives for those we accompany as they ferret out the vast array of stories inside them, along with the courage and the words to express them. We invite our spiritual directees to gain awareness of the stories they have absorbed by giving voice to them—the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the joy-filled, the pain-filled—knowing that a story often contains all these dimensions.

We tell a story to get a story. It is through our conversations, coupled with introspective practices such as meditation, contemplative prayer, or journaling, that we gain attentiveness to our inner narratives. Becoming mindful of our inner narratives is crucial, because the stories we tell ourselves, both consciously and unconsciously, have tremendous power over our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Rather than suppress the stories that cause us suffering, we encourage those we accompany to turn toward and tell the stories about their suffering, not in order to rehearse them but as a means to eventually release them. The basis for our encouragement stems from the wisdom of the Eightfold Noble Path—the prescription Buddhists offer to help transform suffering. (The Eightfold Path starts with two steps relating to a general understanding of suffering and a motivation to change it [Right View and Right Aspiration], three steps relating to our social ethics [Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Lifestyle], and then three steps relating to our inner landscape, working with personal consciousness or “Mind” [Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration]. See Thich Nhat Hahn, The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation.) Suffering is a state to work with rather than avoid. It is only through the exploration of our suffering, and its cause(s), that suffering may cease. In particular, it is the Sixth Step of the Eightfold Path, that of Right Effort, that implores us to cultivate awareness of what is helpful, nourishing, and life-affirming in our stories, and refrains from cultivating what is harmful, poisonous, and life-diminishing in them.

Take a moment to consider:

❖ What is one of the most life-giving stories you received from your family, culture, society, faith community, or other sources?
❖ What is one of the most limiting stories you received from your family, culture, society, faith community, or other sources?
❖ In what ways do these stories have an impact on you today?

In sum, we are not dependent upon the stories that others have driven into us. Each of us has the capacity to author a new story: a story to which we are drawn.

The central importance of developing our capacity for authoring cannot be overstated. We often receive spiritual directees, full-grown adults with accomplished lives, who are still living out of an incomplete, untruthful, or limiting narrative. They may be enacting a story line that they are not even consciously aware of participating in—a story that has been authored and imposed upon them by others. They are stuck simply because they are unaware that they can write a different story from which to live and grow.

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There is a scene from the television show Mystery Science Theater 3000 that offers an apt illustration. In it, we find a man named Joel and his two childlike robot friends, Crow and Tom. The three of them are forced to watch terrible movies, and in order to keep themselves sane and happy, they talk back to the screen throughout—often making wisecracks. One particular movie ends in a pointlessly tragic way. After the movie ends, the three friends emerge from the theater and the robots confront their human companion.

"Joel, Tom and I have been horribly scarred by the way this movie ended, and that means we're filled with rage!
A very calm Joel offers, “Well, you can write a different ending if you want.”
“What??!”
Joel reassures them that it’s just a story. “You don’t have to accept the ending they hand you.”
“Wow,” the two robots say, and then they proceed to describe a completely different ending, complete with dinosaurs, pygmies, magic, space travel, and silly jokes. At the end, they walk away very pleased with themselves, declaring, “Now that’s a better ending!”

This illustration offers a playful expression of what is actually a profound invitation. We do not have to accept the stories we have absorbed. If we do not like the ending handed to us, we are write another.

As narrative therapist Alice Morgan underscores, “Our lives are multistoried. There are many stories occurring at the same time and different stories can be told about the same events. No single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction and no single story can encapsulate or handle all the contingencies of life” (Morgan, 8).

Without being invited to develop a capacity to see those stories and author our own narrative, without having audiences who are willing to hear our story as we tell and retell it, we are dependent upon the stories others tell us about us. We unconsciously succumb to seeing our lives as a series of unrelated events rather than a potentially coherent story. Both our identity and our agency are diminished. We remain in a childlike state and in a childlike relationship to our own life: in bondage to outside authors and ill-equipped to mine the meaning of our own experience.

Optimally, a crucial developmental shift occurs in our adolescent and emerging adulthood years. We now add to our ability to tell stories the capacity to author a life story. We move from merely recounting discrete episodes of what happened to us to constructing a story about our past, perceived present, and imagined future into an internalized, evolving narrative identity. We become the story we tell ourselves, a story that has characters, episodes, imagery, settings, plots, and themes. This story we tell ourselves has the potential to provide our life with a sense of unity and purpose. (Research into the relation between life stories and adaptation shows that those who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and generativity. See Dan P. McAdams, The Art and Science of Personality Development). Rather than being driven to keep repeating the stories that hold us, we now have the capacity to author and hold a narrative to which we are drawn.

The transition to adolescence and young adulthood is a necessary, yet not sufficient, catalyst in developing our capacity to author our life narrative. (Psychologists such as Robert Kegan report that the majority of adults remain in a socialized mindset, failing to develop the capacity for self-authorship. See Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization). We do not become a self on our own, nor do we author our story in isolation. Audiences are vital to the creation of our self and our story. Persons of all ages need listeners who are willing to mine the meaning of their stories with them: that is, to encourage them to dig deeper, to unpack them, to thicken them, to offer the possibility of considering them from a different perspective, to feel their power more deeply and their truth more completely. It is through the synergy of conversation and introspection that we test out various versions of our narrative identity. Our capacity to author develops and continues throughout our life span and, optimally, the story we tell ourselves evolves.

As spiritual directors, it is incumbent upon us to create occasions and invite people to tell and retell, author and re-author, their story both within and outside formal spiritual direction meetings. As Nelle Morton discovered, the woman whose name she never knew might not have heard
her story into speech had it not been for the occasion that
was created in the workshop. One of the most important
contributions we as spiritual directors can offer is designing
ways for a wider array of participants to initially reflect upon,
and continue to deepen their awareness of, their story.

**Invitation to Author the Book of Your Life**

We have found that the following format is an acces-
sible approach for both adolescents and adults of all
ages to reflect upon the arc of their lived history (Millis,
_Conversation—the Sacred Art, 36):

- If my life’s journey were a book, I would title it ...
- The reasons I give my life this title are ...
- The chapters in the book of my life are ...
- The chapter I am in right now is ...
- I am currently discerning and trying to figure out ...
- As I imagine the next chapter on my journey, I hope ...

The first time most participants respond to these ques-
tions, their responses are fairly brief—relayed in a sentence
or in a few words. They tend to tell _thin_ narratives, with-
out much nuance or texture. Initially, persons focus more
on what narrative therapists refer to as the landscape of
action, that is, the who, what, when, and where of their
life. However, we have found that the more one commits
to listening to his life and sharing it in conversation with
others, the more their narratives begin to _thicken_. Through
the telling and subsequent retelling of key moments, they
begin to include another dimension, what narrative ther-
apists refer to as the landscape of consciousness. Their sto-
ries now include how they felt about these key moments,
what they valued, and what they learned from them.

Over time, we discover that the most notable character-
istic of our burgeoning capacity to author is the realization
that _there is more than one way to tell our story. It is
not what we have experienced that defines us but rather
the stories we tell about our experiences._

When I, Diane, entered into spiritual direction at age
twenty-five, I was telling the following story: my life
fell apart at age eleven. It was that year that my parents
divorced, and my mother moved my sisters and me from
my beloved home in the state of Minnesota to another
part of the country. At that time, I would have named
the book of my life, _Broken Apart_. My teenage years were
consumed with both lamenting what I had lost and try-
ing to find a way to return home to Minnesota. I kept
telling myself what psychologists refer to as a story with a
contaminative sequence, that after X occurs, one’s life will
never be as good as before X occurred (McAdams, 265).

However, after time in spiritual direction, I began to
tell a more redemptive story. I began to see that I had
discovered profound meaning in the unexpected suffering
I experienced so early in life. While it did not mitigate the
sense of brokenheartedness I had felt and still feel, I began
to tell a different story about the fruits of the heartbreak. I
have grown to see that through the heartbreak of my par-
ents’ divorce and the subsequent feelings of displacement
I experienced in moving to another part of the country,
I found my vocation. Those devastating experiences
increased my compassion, my willingness to be vulner-
able, and my commitment to accompanying those who
are experiencing heartbreak. As a result of this realization,
I would now rename the book of my life, _Broken Open._

When I, Busshō, entered into spiritual direction at the
age of thirty, the core of my story, albeit unconsciously,
was one of fundamental personal inadequacy. I had
adopted a belief in, and by extension an experience of,
early constant failure and unworthiness. By age sev-
en, I had made literally real this narrative and had begun
a long downward slide into living as a depressive alcoholic.
Labeling depression and alcoholism as diseases is certainly
ture, at least relatively speaking. But the disease label also
contains some pretty hard limits. The label helped me to
sidestep some of the collective shame and social stigma
tese conditions often carry. To that extent, the label was
very helpful for a time. But at some point, I could sense
that the disease narrative was becoming a limiting trap.

Shortly before seeking out a spiritual director, I had gone
through treatment for chemical dependency and attended
Alcoholics Anonymous meetings regularly. One of the
common threads during that period, in both my spiritual
direction and AA work, was the recognition of those foun-
dational and unexamined belief systems. It took a long
time to recognize the pervasiveness of those destructive core
stories and even longer to recognize their falsehood. I had to
see those stories and how I had lived into them. And, I also
began to see how I might live out of them.

As our stories illustrate, _any story that we tell is both
just a story and there is more to the story; any story that_
we tell is always open to new interpretation. And that is why it is imperative that we remind our spiritual directees that any story they tell is to be held lightly, not tightly.

This “lightly, not tightly” idea is at home in both Buddhist and Christian thought. In Buddhism, the stories we tell, although they can be of great supportive value and may contain helpful clues, are ultimately incomplete. As practitioners, we are encouraged not to regard our story as fact but to investigate what truths our story is wanting to tell us. Stories are seen as guideposts, in that any story refers to something beyond the current narrative, or as the Zen tradition might say, “fingers pointing to the moon, not the moon itself.” In Christianity, the fundamental story that undergirds our own is the story of the paschal mystery—a story of suffering, death, and new life. This cyclical pattern points to the warp and woof of our lives. As such, any story that we tell is potentially a story pointing to resurrection, inviting us to look for the revelation of signs of new life, of grace, of greater love.

Learning to hold our stories lightly, not tightly, is a capacity that requires development. As spiritual directors, we can model this capacity through the way in which we respond to our spiritual directee’s narratives.

It is not up to us to interpret the meaning of how God is at work in another’s life. By refraining from offering interpretations and by remaining curious, we encourage our spiritual directees to continue to listen deeply within. We offer questions to which we genuinely do not know the answers. We offer questions that invite them to dig deeper, to unpack their story, to thicken their narrative, and to keep it fresh (Millis, Deepening Engagement, 67–71).

Our questions provide the tools that make it possible for people to mine the meaning of their lived experience, to construct alternative stories and explore neglected territores. (Alternative stories and neglected territores are terms coined by Michael White, one of the founders of narrative therapy.) We encourage our spiritual directees to go all the way into their lived experience and keep re-authoring their story. We invite them to give expression to the preferred story by which they would like to live their lives, a story that increases their sense of compassion, hope, goodness, truth, beauty, and love. For both our spiritual directees and ourselves, re-authoring requires a commitment to ongoing discernment as we consider how our own preferred story aligns with life’s preferred story for us.
We Are Being Held: Looking and Listening for the Story Waiting to Be Told

Insofar as the person is in relationship with God, God’s activity will break into the narrative by causing some kind of disorganization, contradicting an absolute form of self-assertion of the ego, or emerging as some inexplicable and mysterious confusion. By attending to these intrusions, the director may be able to help directees piece together a story of God and themselves, one that is not exclusively the story of the ego.

—Janet Ruffing, To Tell The Sacred Tale (103-4)

While our egos strive to understand and seek a definitive explanation as to why this disruptive event had to happen in our lives or why this unexpected suffering is happening to us now, our actual lived experience defies understanding, demands rapt attention, and is inherently dynamic and uncontrollable. Our lives seem to defy a single story and to defy a single author. Learning to author our most life-giving story is a process of awakening to the reality of cocreation and that we are all being held in a limitless narrative frame. In Zen Buddhist terms we might say it is the submission of ego to life itself—a vow to live in service to life and not to demand that life serve us. In Christian terms, we pray for “eyes to see, and ears to hear” as we coauthor with Spirit.

Jane Hirshfield, in her poem “Rebus,” offers us an especially apt metaphor for working with our spiritual directees and their narratives at this stage. A rebus is “a representation of words in the form of pictures or symbols, often presented in a puzzle.” Hirshfield muses, “When will I learn to read it [that is, the puzzle of my life]… not to understand it, only to see?” (Hirshfield, 12).

The “only seeing” teaching must be understood as appropriate to a specific stage of personal and spiritual development, as well as hugely helpful to us if we are ready for it, but potentially damaging if we are not. For example, the founder of Minnesota Zen Center, Dainin Katagiri, was once sitting in a private interview with a long-term student grieving her husband’s death. She kept crying, “Why? Why did he have to die?” Katagiri’s response to her was, “The ‘why’ is extra.” His response can be understood as not only wise (“why” is not the right question, as there is no helpful answer); it is also compassionate. The grieving woman’s demand for a cognitive explanation for her loss was preventing her from doing the necessary work: to enter more deeply into experiencing her own suffering with self-compassion and love and thereby healing it.

One of Buddhism’s most challenging teachings is that of anatta, or “non-self.” Anatta conceives of the self as an intrinsic part of the dynamic flow of all things and, therefore, not actually separate or permanent as such. The implications of this teaching implore us to see not only the fiction of the stories we tell but also the fiction of the self who authors them. The experience that informs this teaching is one of profound freedom, rather than fear and meaninglessness. It challenges us to look not only at our stories but also at our very selves, as necessary fictions. As such, any story we tell will remain incomplete.

Nonetheless, wisdom figures from an array of traditions offer us a guiding question as we mine the meaning of those particularly puzzling pages in the book of our lives: “What is being revealed here?” In response to this question, The Cloud of Unknowing, a fourteenth-century spiritual classic, implores us to:

Remember, dear friend, we live in a world that offers much in suffering, but also in consolation. You will not always understand it yourself; but seek to love it and seek to love yourself and to be loved. Know that the God of love has created us all, guides us all, and wills to bring us all back to Godself, the source whence we came. (Meninger, 134)

Therefore, the invitation at this stage, and ultimately at any stage of narrative exploration, is to seek love, that is, to look for the presence of love in more and more of our lived experience—in all of love’s various guises. Our stories and love’s action in them are never complete or finished. There is always more meaning, more grace, and more love waiting to be found and with it, a more life-giving story waiting to be told.

Conclusion: Accompanying Others on this Threefold Path

The birds have all vanished from the sky, and now the last cloud drains away; we sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.

—Li Po, “Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain,” (42)
As we reflect upon what we have written, we have noticed that the features of these three narrative stances bear similarity to the three central movements of the mystical path: purgation, illumination, and union. We conclude by noting these similarities. While not intended to be diagnostic, we offer this comparison as a lens through which we might become better able to assess our spiritual directees’ needs and skillfully respond to them:

- **Purgation/The Stories That Hold Us**: We invite our spiritual directees to gain awareness of the array of narratives that hold them, examining the full range of stories they have absorbed from those that are helpful and healing to those that are harmful and hindering. We ask them to pay attention to their felt sense as they tell their stories in an effort to purge themselves of those that they experience as debilitating and destructive. Such purging is not intended to be a battle with the ego. Through our reverence and unconditional positive regard for all people and their unique constellation of stories, we can help them to soften the grip of the stories that are holding them and develop compassion for themselves (as well as for others who have been beholden to similar scripts). This process can be compared to some senses to the winnowing and sifting described in step six of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, Right Effort. It is at this point in our journeys that we begin to develop an observer self. In this stage, we are both subject (the observer) and object (the ego self it observes).

- **Illumination/The Stories We Hold**: As our spiritual directees give voice to and begin to construct their unique story, we encourage them to keep digging deeper, to try on alternative stories, and tenderly step into neglected territories. As they consciously commit to contemplating messy and complex life experiences that seem to defy meaning making, they may turn to other sources of knowing that transcend and infuse them. This gentle gaze of illumination can be compared to the Eightfold Path’s seventh step, Right Mindfulness. This is an expansion of the observer self, but at this stage the observer increasingly observes with kind compassion—rather than grabbing or pushing away anything that arises in the field of awareness. It is likened to the sky’s relationship to the clouds; everything is held and accepted just as it is.

In this stage, there is perhaps more ambiguity, as well as a less distinct line between subject and object and between observer self and observed self.

- **Union/We Are Being Held**: At this stage, which is largely ineffable and defies description, spiritual directees are increasingly willing to both surrender their need to understand their story fully as well as their desire to author it solely. Rather than being beholden to a preferred way of narrating their story, they continue to look for what is being revealed in their story: how they are being, have been, and will be held by love. This experience of union is what is described in the Buddhist Eightfold Path’s eighth step, Right Concentration or Right Absorption. This is the nondual state where the usual “I” is left behind. In this stage there is only object and no subject. The distinction between observer and observed no longer arises, and the distinction between author and co-author is no longer two—together they are one.

The divine tuning fork of the human soul knows when it is in the presence of those who can accompany it to its own depths (as Nelle Morton’s story, with which we opened this article, so brilliantly illustrates). And it also knows when it is not.

Regardless of where we find our spiritual directees on this path of narrative development, *hearing others all the way to their own story* requires that we continue plunging courageously into our own. We can only accompany people as far as we ourselves have gone. We can only bear witness to the joy and suffering that we ourselves can both allow and feel all the way through.

Inspired by the example of the woman whose name we will never know and those unnamed few who accompanied her, may we vow to enter as they did into the precious depths of our own lives. As spiritual directors, may we vow to accompany others into the precious depths of theirs. And as we do, may we vow to discover that these depths are not separate, and that we are all, together, made new.

**References**


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The Story

I have a story inside of me
Perhaps more than two or three
Each has its very own purpose
Each displays another piece of me.

I started building them early
Much before I can consciously recall
They grew and assembled in their own way
They are still deep inside of me, all.

It can be challenging to examine our stories
As we tell them time and again
Each has a life, each has a purpose
To re-examine life way back when.

Over time we adjust our stories
In hopes to have them make sense
A little tweak here and a little snip there
True introspection or a veiled self-defense.

We all want to make good sense of our lives
What happened, and why was it so?

We work on the puzzle in every which way
Just where does this one damn piece go!?!?

And as we rearrange the scene
Before us in our mind
Can we find clarity and peace?
To our own selves can we be kind?

For as we look upon the scene
We're building so as to tell
That is indeed our deepest hope
That pain and suffering be quelled.

But maybe that's not in the cards
This particular time around
We'll have more chances down the road
The possibilities abound.

And even if it never settles
Yet churns still hour after hour
To pause, reflect and think anew
That's the story's unlimited power.

Scott S. Campbell