

# The Power of Story in Transformation



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*Learning Fellow, Church of the Larger Fellowship*

In the quiet moments of reflection, I find myself thinking about my own life story, each page revealing moments of growth, resilience, and transformation. I wonder, where are there places in my story where I did my best? My least? When did I show up for myself or others? When did I disappoint? When did I choose to make amends? When did I choose to pretend I was infallible? All of these things are human, and owning up to them is how we get a clear picture of who we are, through the stories we tell. These stories, the tales we tell about ourselves, are the keys to unlocking the doors of personal and spiritual growth.

Think about a time in your life when everything shifted, when the world seemed to pivot on its axis. These are the turning points, the moments of realization that alter the course of our stories. Perhaps it was overcoming a challenge, navigating a difficult choice, or coming to terms with a decision you made. What story did you tell to get you through that moment? Did you make something up that you could aspire to? Did you own up and lean into honesty?

Adversity is not the end of the tale, nor a stopping point, but an opportunity for growth. It's not the smooth, easy paths that define, but the rocky

terrains that build us. Each obstacle becomes a stepping stone, a testament to the resilience cultivated through the struggles faced. Loneliness and isolation were experiences that many of us faced during the COVID 19 lockdown, and too many are still in this space. Enduring this kind of long-term struggle has given most of us a greater sense of connection when we are in the presence of others, in person or online. This is one of many examples of adversity shaping us. What struggles shape you? How do these points of adversity influence your overall story? Do they define you? Are they stepping stones for learning?

I think about the unwritten pages of my story. The narrative is far from complete; the journey of transformation is ongoing. What will the next chapters hold? How will my story continue to evolve? These questions excite me. Encourage me to have hope for a future. To dream big, knowing that anything is possible because I have the capacity to imagine my story. To create the reality I want. It also gives me incredible focus to determine what I really want. If I dreamed to have a big, beautiful thriving garden but no space for one, I would think about what I wanted from that garden. If I want beautiful flowers that I could see all around me, then I can draw or paint them on

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# Quest

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*"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."*

MAYA ANGELOU

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# STORYTELLING & STORIES THAT SHAPE US

*What are the stories that shape you?*

*What role does storytelling play in your life?*

JACOB

*CLF member, incarcerated in AK*

This has been a harder question for me to approach. Many times we hit the point we want to ignore or hide the truth about the stories that have shaped us, either because of embarrassment, fear, or some other now silly-seeming emotion. As I sit here, though, I realize that if those stories had not shaped me, I may never have made it so far in life before incarceration or even possibly death.

To start, a bit about my familial/social setting. My mom's side of the family is from Iowa, and my dad's side of the family is very Hillbilly, Good Ole Country boy types from the Northern Hills of Arkansas. All of that meant a very big learning curve for a child.

The stories of Hedge Witches, Shamans, and Healers are accepted truths from my dad's side of the family. On my mom's side, there were hardcore Catholic rituals, teachings, trainings, and underpinnings. The two do not



PHOTO BY TOM HERMANS ON UNSPLASH

readily mesh, but I always enjoyed walking in both paths of my family, learning from both sides.

Then, you add in the fact that I am homosexual, and could never hide my effemininity. My father and his fifth wife loved to give me lectures on the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah, fixating on the homosexuals while ignoring the full stories. They

never appreciated me pointing out the key fact that it was the culmination of the sum of all of the inequalities that led to their destruction. Often this would lead to arguments and anger on both sides.

Disney Princess stories such as

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Mulan, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast made me think, "If they can find love then maybe someday I can as well." Or can I?

The stories of various novels, like the *Ramona* series, gave me an escape from the pains of daily life, while motivating my curiosity and creativity.

The stories that family and friends told of their experiences and things they had seen helped shape my ambitions and drive to leave our small town. Grandpa, my dad's dad, would tell of the antics of his peers and family. Often these would make me not want to be trapped in those same patterns. My Grandma, my mom's mom, would point me to stories of succeeding, being yourself and fighting for something. These encouraged my drive to help others as well as be an outspoken advocate.

All of these stories have pushed me on, opened my eyes to things I may have missed, as well as motivated me to leave the hills and to see what I could learn and do.

Overall, storytelling has greatly shaped my life. Now I write fiction and non-fiction stories in an attempt to help others in similar situations push through and succeed. We have to share our stories, our truths, and our experiences to help others know that it's possible to push through it all. ■

## Comfortable

BARNEY SILK

*CLF member, incarcerated in TX*

They say I must have grown up with a 'chip on my shoulder,' but I'd like to see you come and push my boulder. Or walk a minute in this mile I call my life, and see how well you manage strife. I grew up watching other kids get things they never had to earn, that was a tough lesson I had to learn.

Because you see, I grew up in poverty and never knew what it was like to be rich, having to cut steps in the dirt to get to the mailbox from the ditch. Or wondering how me and my Grandma would make it another day, when black eyed peas and cornbread proved to be the only way.

So please don't sit in judgment of



PHOTO BY JESSE BOWSER ON UNSPLASH

me from the comfort and confines of your nice big home, because ain't no one ever just throw me a bone. And don't try to say, "you know what it's like," because I'm no fool, see you don't know anything about the beatings and sexual abuse when I came home from school. Or about the times I was almost killed, lying torn

and bloody in an old farm field.

And I'm not just some writer whose dream it is for his name to be called out from a crowd by a Raven fan, I'm comfortable enough just being a man. Because you see I'm a Silk and I know what it's like, to not have all the tools yet still get it right. ■



GARY

*CLF member, incarcerated in SC*

Growing up in the South of the 1960s, my pre-school days were spent in the tender care of my maternal grandmother. These were seemingly innocent times long before video games, cell phones, or computers. The turbulence of the time, the Civil Rights Movement and War in Vietnam, were far removed from the fresh-baked bread smell of Grandma's Kitchen.

My days were filled with tomato sandwiches, iced tea with lemon, and snow cream in the winter. But each day came with "naptime." And naptime always came with one of Grandma's "Lake Swamp Stories."

Grandma was from a "little speck of a place," as she termed it, called Lake Swamp in the South Carolina lowcountry. About 30 or so miles outside of Florence, Lake Swamp was little more than a local school, a tiny grocery store, and a barbershop.

Her daily tales were like a fantasy world to my childhood ears. No TV? No refrigerator? No indoor bathroom? I was fascinated.

The 1920s in rural South Carolina may initially seem a quiet, pastoral scene. Yet, Grandma's stories of barn dances, alligators crawling out of creeks, thundering circuit-riding preachers, and huge Sunday dinners seemed like an amazing place in time.

## Grandma

GARY

*CLF member, incarcerated in SC*

Over a pot she'd dice wild onions  
add a "mess" of greens cut from her garden  
toss in a chunk of salt pork  
then feed us lip-smacking joy  
Wells of goodness from humble fare  
the magic of a Grandma  
a quilt from precious scraps  
a christening gown, an old shawl  
cornhusks made into dolls  
snowcream dusted with cinnamon  
and just a speck of rum  
Tuberose snuff, yeast-baked bread  
pillowy, soft, just life her hugs

But beyond being mere childhood pre-nap stories, Grandma's tales gave me a unique sense of identity. She, unknowingly, lit the fire for my own love of writing and fed that flame with the basis for many of my short stories.

The 1960s were truly not "Leave It To Beaver" innocence for many, if not most, especially in the South. But my Grandma carved a safe space for my childhood and, importantly, gave me a love of writing. ■



PHOTO BY KYLE GLENN ON UNSPLASH

# Convict Chronicles: the stories that save us

LEO CARDEZ

*CLF member, incarcerated in IL*

"Corners," my newest celly, is middle-aged and polite — the sort of man who carries the normal toil of the world. We have a lot in common and often spend hours talking about this or that. He's easy to talk to, quick to grin with a wry sparkle to his eyes when he shares stories that are close to him.

Neither of us are much for idle chit chat or gossip, but occasionally we open up about our fears, hopes, and dreams and it can be quite powerful. I can always tell when he's getting into a story, he leans forward pinning me with the force of his words. Stories of his past life, pre-prison, are tinged with regret; nothing more so than the loss of his daughter. She's not dead, but when he came to prison in many real ways he died to her. Prison is certainly a type of death. Are we buried yet undead or are we dead yet unburied? She was only 8 years old when he came to prison and he still recalls her bright pink pajamas with the footies she was about to outgrow in another growth spurt. In fact, he told me, there has not been a single minute in a single day since he left that he hasn't thought about her — not a moment has slid by when the world was not still oriented toward her. His words shook me to my soul. The depth of his tragic story of multi-generational addiction and abuse pinched the oxygen

from the air. Yet, by all measures, it was clear to me he had learned to use his grief as a weapon for his faith and inner recalibration.

I see myself in all his stories, it is as if I'm speaking through him, only the names and dates are different. I suppose that is the purpose of good storytelling: be tiny and epic at the same time. The best stories are local slices of Life. They concern the neighborhoods where we grew up, our closest friends, and favorite things. They are close to the bone, the flesh of our lives. And yet, they are universal, too, because they speak to our shared humanity; the fears and hopes we all share as sons, brothers, fathers, and friends. Stories of prison woes, I've learned, are very similar regardless of age, nationality, or culture; what happened to one, happens to all.

Corner's story is rooted in suburban privilege, but the story arc plays out similarly around the country's prisons: an unfair criminal justice system, fear, loss, and the desperate attempt to find and hold onto hope and purpose in our cold, austere world.

It is an undeniable truth, when we open our hearts to hear each others' stories — we oftentimes find ourselves in them; we realize we are not so different after all and others' experiences can become our own. I'm confident employing shared storytelling as part

of a larger restorative justice effort, connecting victims and offenders, would certainly break down barriers, shatter stereotypes, and be a conduit to true healing. But, that's a bigger story for another time.

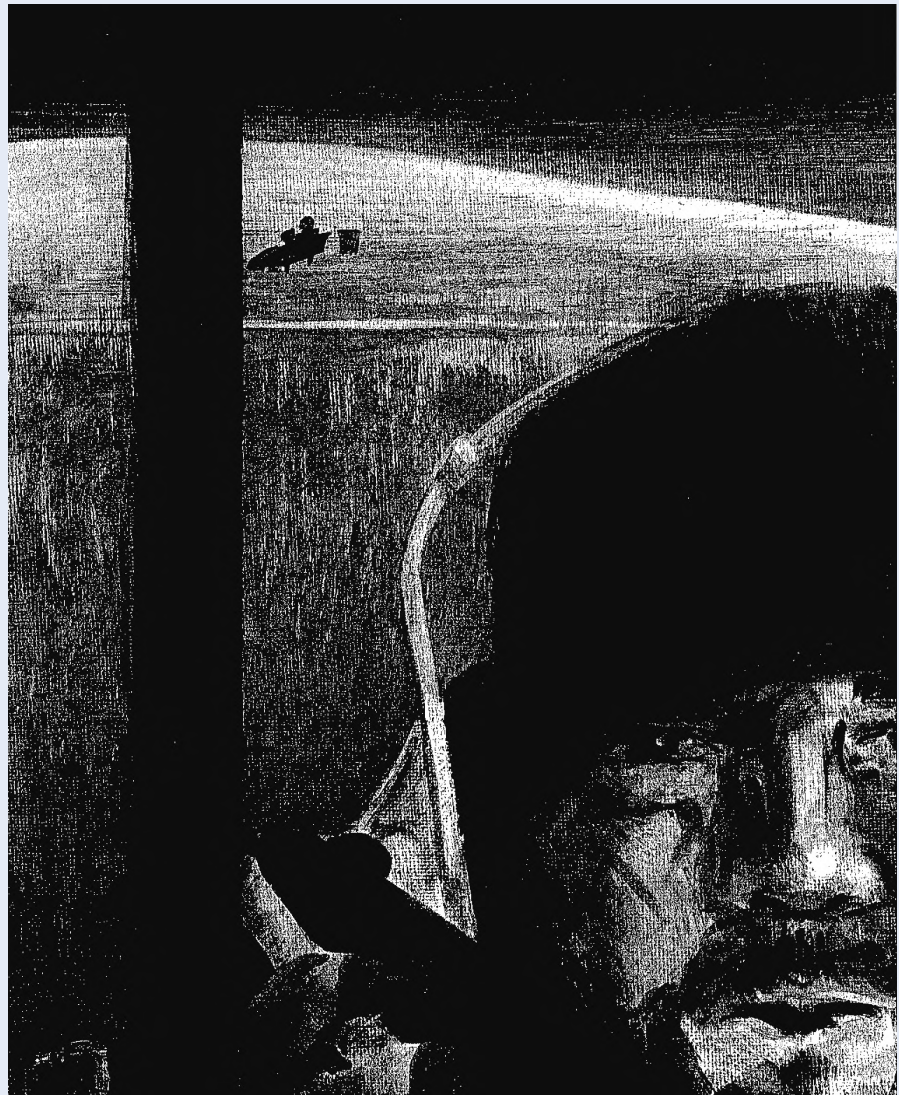
"There is no agony like leaving an untold story inside of you," Zora Neale Hurston wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. That quote is the principle that guides my writing. As much as my writing may have a self-help angle or sense to it, what I really want to impart is the human pulse of the stories. The essence of their message is that we're all in the same boat just trying to get through this harder-than-we-could-have-ever-imagined thing called life. We need, nay, we must, share what we've endured as a means of catharsis and connection. I've often encouraged my fellow inmates to write their story. I believe everyone in prison has a novel inside of them waiting to bloom, if only they'd sit down to write it.

Corners' stories keep unfolding, every one as poignant as the last and as we get to know each other the recitation and exchange of these stories is where the common ground begins to emerge. It is how respect and friendships are built.

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*Artwork by Leo Cardez*

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My greatest fear is that my own daughter may follow in my addiction footsteps. I've read that young people today have the highest rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in history. Many experts believe they are symptoms of a generation being raised during the digital revolution.

As connected as the internet has the capability to make us, apparently today's youth has never felt more alone and unheard. Stories are unfolding in them and they need to express them. I encourage my daughter to seek help, if and when she feels she needs it; to talk about her feelings. And she does. She's putting cracks in the emotional walls that hold her hostage, so eventually the whole thing will fall. That's

what happens with enough time and pressure, even the hardest rocks will eventually turn to dust. But, the waiting and continuous effort needed to break down the walls is what is heart-breaking. But, that's why we must continue to share all those stories we keep hidden in secret chambers of our hearts — they are what make us and what may save us all. ■

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### The Power of Story, cont. from page 1

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every scrap of paper I can find, and put them on the walls around me so that every place I look I see beautiful flowers. The method is different, but the result is the same. Dream big.

In the stillness of your own reflections, your own dreaming, consider the stories you tell yourself. What tales shape your understanding of who you are? Are they stories of resilience, growth, and self-discovery, or are they narratives that hinder your potential for transformation? Take a moment to explore the narratives that guide you and reflect on the power they hold in shaping the person you are becoming.



PHOTO BY AARON BURDEN ON UNSPLASH

Our stories have the power to script the future chapters of our lives. With intention, we can embrace the story that unfolds with each word, each reflection, and each move forward.

After all, the story we tell about ourselves is not just a recounting of the past; it is a living, breathing narrative that shapes the person we are becoming. ■

## FOR YOUR REFLECTION

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*In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.*

**What stories do you return to again and again? What new stories are you creating as you shape your own life and meaning?**

*If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.*





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