

Intergenerational self

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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After a person becomes a pastor of a particular congregation, going to church changes. One thing that I didn't expect was the point of view I would suddenly have. We have that physical shift in our perspective because we're no longer looking at the back of congregational necks, but we can see the eyes of people.

But it's more than that. After people began to slip into my office during a time of crisis, or they started to open up over coffee, I began to understand something. No one has an easy life. Some people have more privilege. Some have more economic resources to deal with their issues. But, at least by the time that people have gotten to a certain age, many people have gone through the passing of a parent, being sexually violated, caring for a dying child, being fired, getting divorced, living through abuse, and the list goes on.

When I began to stand before people, leading them in ancient liturgies and songs, I would not only see them, but I'd also see the shadows of the person. I saw the things that they felt guilt about but could not let go. I noticed the ghosts that they carried around with them—people who had gone before them, settling in the pews with them. I could see how the seat seemed to sag under their weight, because of all the stuff they had to carry around—the sorrow and the injuries.

People not only carried themselves into the pews, but they carried a lifetime of pain. How were they able to handle it? Why were they so resilient? Why are some people able to deal with such terrible situations and circumstances?

According to [this article](#), Dr. Marshall Duke from Emory University seemed to have found a key: telling stories. When our families have a narrative that we share, then members of that family do better. The article explains that

- **Some families have an ascending narrative.** Our family was brought over from Africa as slaves. We worked hard. Your grandfather finished high

school and your father went to college. And now we expect great things from you.

- **Some families had a descending narrative.** We were well-off, and then we lost everything in the financial crisis.
- **But the most powerful seems to be the oscillating family narrative.** You know that we have had some amazing people in our family—your mother was a trailblazer in her research. Your father served as an elder in our church. We have food on the table and a roof over our heads. But that it has not always been the case. It hasn't always been easy for our family. You know it was difficult when your uncle got arrested for a DWI. He went into rehab and goes to meetings regularly. You know that your grandmother lost a child. It was the most tragic and painful thing that our family endured. But with the love our family and friends, we are here. We've made it through tough storms.

We know what stories do. The words bind us into a larger narrative. They give us an emotional and historical connection. They allow us to transfer important values. But they also allow us to build what Dr. Duke called the **“Intergenerational Self.”** The intergenerational self means that we know that we are connected to those who have come before us. We are part of something larger than our individual identities.

I love when researchers begin to discover what we have known and practiced in our churches for thousands of years. Understanding our hardships in the context of multiple generations, connecting our story to a larger history, and realizing that we step into a flowing faith of strength, helps us to build our intergenerational selves and, in turn, become a resilient people.

[Hat tip to @holabrody for pointing out this story on Twitter.]