

Telling the old, old stories

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(RNS) At a church workshop last week, I set aside my carefully planned teaching and just let people talk.

It became clear that everyone had an old story they needed to tell. Until it was heard, no one in the room could or would move on to thinking about the future. And even when it was heard, half of them would keep cycling back to the old story.

I sensed that, for some, the old story contained an identity, in the sense of “this story is who I am.” I need to keep telling this story so that you know me. Until I am sure you’ve heard it, know me, and accept me, I can’t stop.

For some, the old story was the burden on their back, the cloud over their heads. This story explains why I fall short, seem hesitant or even paralyzed. If you know my story, maybe you can accept me and forgive me.

For some, the old story was the safe place, the known that kept the scary unknown at bay. As long as I keep telling this story and presenting the me that existed yesterday, I don’t have to contemplate the ways I am changing and the tomorrow that worries me.

It was like a case study in the long-ago classic, “I’m OK — You’re OK.” People wanted to know they were OK — acceptable and maybe someday even loved.

I think back to a recent lunch with the rector of the local Episcopal church, where I kept peeling the onion, telling her one thing about myself and then, if she accepted that, telling her something more. She was doing the same. If we know each other and still accept each other, then we can be in relationship.

The group on Saturday talked a lot about trust issues in their church. I wondered briefly if there had been a single traumatic event, like sexual abuse. But then I realized they just hadn’t let go of their old stories. They were in the same room, but a long way from being in relationship.

I think of our tortured political conversations, in which passionate people stay stuck in the same views they expressed last year and 10 years ago, as if nothing had changed in the context or in themselves.

I wonder how much of our instant anger is a desperate drive to be heard and accepted. In our nondemocratic context, only a few actually feel potent. Most feel impotent, watching things they care about implode or coarsen or move in a direction they feel powerless to affect.

So we tell old stories. Again and again. Maybe adding a few details we gleaned from Fox News or The New York Times, but essentially telling the same stories that identify us and make us feel safe.

Politicians cease to resolve problems, but focus instead on aligning themselves with our old stories. We feast on each other's frustration but don't actually address and resolve the causes of frustration.

This prevailing impotence is one outcome of the widening gap between a few haves and a vast cohort of have-nots. Before long, the angry retelling of old stories will undo democracy itself. For democracy depends not only on the freedom to say anything, but on mutual respect in being heard and honored.

When enough people feel unheard, unacceptable, not OK, the system will collapse.