

Rules for Discerning Stories

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Of the many stories in our lives, those most in need of discernment are the dramatic narratives in which we imagine the paths and plots of our lives because these stories may be true or false. False stories warp the imagination in ways that focus on some experiences and overlook others. People living mainly for themselves focus on what benefits or threatens them; they are unaware of the natural human need for self-transcendence. The following rules are designed as an aid in scrutinizing stories that impose themselves on our experience and to embrace stories that reveal the true drama of living beyond ourselves.

Stories and Facts

1. Events are open to many interpretations of the same experiences. Husbands and wives tell different stories about the same dinner with friends. A woman tells one story on the day of her engagement and another a decade later. A man describes a tragic story upon losing his job and a providential story a year later.
2. Sometimes we accept the role given us in someone else's story. If we then behave in that character, we provide ongoing evidence that the story is true.

So the battered wife soon believes she deserves abuse and acts in ways that beg punishment. Conversely, a student who will not accept being called stupid will more readily ask questions and more thoroughly learn what is being taught.

The familiar false story of being successful involves being rich and famous. Both the famous rich and the anonymous poor believe it.

3. While some stories patently do not fit the facts, several may. We choose among several plausible stories not on the basis of evidence but under the influence of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation. (See "Rules for Discerning Inspirations.")

Thus, a clear sign of a false story is that it evokes scattered feelings—feeling alone, stranded, anxious, overly defensive, hyper-excited, afraid, resentful, or bitter. Whether the plot be about success or failure, if we feel barren and jumbled inside, the story is probably not true.

A true story will leave us feeling centered, humble, honest, alive, and in touch with the real world around us. It may not be a pleasant story. It

may be a story of our suffering or even of our sin; but if we meet our negative experiences with integrity, then we sense that we are living in the truth of our lives.

Self-World Dramas

1. Besides specific stories about ourselves, there are general stories of the entire drama of our human condition:

A drama of fate envisions the human condition as dominated by the cosmos, the stars, the government, or dumb luck.

A drama of strength envisions the human condition, with all its wars and hatred, as the struggle of humanity to transcend itself by means of reason and virtue.

A drama of salvation envisions the human condition as being unable to transcend itself without God's continuing hand in history and hearts.

2. All three dramas, at different times, may influence how any one person imagines work.

In the drama of fate, one imagines work as ultimately fruitless.

In the drama of strength, one imagines work as efforts to maintain human self-sufficiency.

In the drama of salvation, one imagines work within the drama of human insufficiency and God's saving work.

3. The natural dynamic of a person's consciousness, especially a person in love with God, is restless to resolve these conflicting dramas and to envision the world-drama with God's eyes and heart.

False Stories

1. Some stories arise from our unconscious, while others originate from our society, our culture, or our family. In any case, we often act out the role assigned to us before we notice the stage we are on.
2. False stories arising from the unconscious avoid being told out loud. Yet we still act out a self-debilitating role. To understand our actions it is practically useless to consult our feelings. This is because repression can cloak original feelings in the garb of feelings more congenial to the role we play. But it is quite useful to watch our external behavior and, like an impartial observer, consider and humbly realize the role this behavior manifests. Needless to say, when our behavior is too inappropriate and we are at a loss to explain why, we may need professional help.

3. False stories originating in our community prefer being told out loud. Our station in life becomes a matter of group pride. Worse, we often feel a consolation that is not from God. We feel comfortable with a decision; we enjoy our role; we like ourselves where we are because most others like us there too. This consolation is analogous to the "angel of light" temptation mentioned in "Rules for Discerning Inspirations."

4. Another indicator that we have accepted a false story from our community is the phenomenon of closed access. Are there places you cannot go? Are there people you cannot approach? Materials you cannot use? Services you cannot avail yourself of? Places where you are "out of place?" Are there vested interests of others keeping you "in your place"?

Or have you closed access to others, by shutting yourself behind a door, by a self-imposed exile, or by climbing onto a pedestal of honor? Does your station or title prevent others from approaching you? Although each solitary heart cherishes God within in an unprecedented way, God desires a union of all hearts in the divine Kingdom.

5. Another other indicator is the experience of a strong desire to play a role—a teacher, a doctor, an inventor, a cook, a minister—rather than a strong desire to do something worthwhile. To imagine ourselves honored can bring a spiritual consolation full of a blinding dazzle. But when God draws our souls, we do not imagine our individual selves. We do not feel a glow of becoming a somebody. Rather we feel drawn in a way that involves self-loss, a risk to our reputation, a need to trust God, and a genuine love of any neighbor.

6. Closed access and becoming a personage combine in the phenomenon of "mystification"—talking for the sake of maintaining respect rather than speaking the truth. Intelligent-sounding words are used in unintelligent ways. We rely on the force of our personality rather than appeal to the minds and hearts of others. Mystifying talk prohibits probing questions. The brilliant Thomas Aquinas preferred to enlighten over trying merely to shine.

7. The false stories originating from our unconscious can do great damage to our spirits. But the false stories originating from our communities are more lethal because they deafen the entire community to the word of God and reinforce a community's natural self-centeredness. The spiritual capital of the community is depleted. New members find strange expectations imposed on them and taboos against questioning the status quo. Even highly-educated members of a community living a false story have an ever-diminishing potential for naming what is wrong in the community.

8. The strongest refutation of a false story comes from the truths of our faith. We in fact are never alone. We are lovingly fashioned by God. All things are God's gift. God has promised never to leave us stranded. It remains true that we are temples of God within.

The Saving Story

1. The Good News is that the one true story is a drama of salvation—the Paschal story that we each live out. Real living involves dying. Dying is part of everyone's real story. We die to self-defeating habits; we choke the life out of recurring temptations; we mortify our selfish desires; we sacrifice our precious time to care for the sick; we ritualize the Cross in our lives by symbolic gestures of dying—by baptism, by tracing a Cross on our bodies, by accepting sorrows and penance for our sins, and by our share in the sorrows of others. Yet the way in which each person lives out the Paschal story unfolds only gradually. One's concrete story is unfinished before death. Yet every moment in living out the true story is a unique and eternally significant event of God's Kingdom on earth in human time as it is in heaven in divine time.

2. To *tell* the true story we give a vivid description. But to *embrace its truth* we make an assent that rises above description. Children come to realize that descriptions of heaven as *up* are unreliable, since we live on a ball. Adults come to realize that descriptions of a life *after* this one are unreliable, since our bodies truly rot and no one can imagine themselves truly alive without a body.

Yet one trusts that the symbols of *up* and *after* carry profound meanings beyond human description but not beyond the assertions of faith. So one counts on the truth that "The Lord is just in all his ways," even when one feels the agonizing ways of a world "in sin and error pining." One counts on the truth that "The Lord is faithful in all his deeds," even when one fears the loss of loved ones, one's very self, in death. One counts on the truth that to live fully in God is to live in very life of God, to whom everyone is alive.

3. Prophecy is not a matter of predicting the future. It is telling the true story of the present.

To tell a true story to people clinging to a false one, it is very important that it be done in an atmosphere of genuine love. Reasoning and analysis will not work because the false stories can all point to experience for reasonable validation. But the true story will point to the further experiences of being drawn quietly within by God, of feeling the risk of self-loss, and of genuine care for one's neighbor.

The true story will see the struggle to name what is really going on as a struggle between our love for God and our fear of losing ourselves. In an

atmosphere of friendly love, where people can acknowledge their fears, they more easily recognize in a true story the innermost desires, the hopes, and the fidelity of God.