

Narratives that hurt and narratives that heal...



Fiona and Shrek from the movie *Shrek*

Many kinds of story help to shape our living and aspirations, and I wonder which ones shaped you in the impressionable years of childhood? Some of the stories which have helped to form many from a European background were the oral fairy tales first collected by the Grimm brothers. Stories which have been adapted, re-worked, and sometimes tamed in more recent years by Disney and Pixar.

The traditional tales of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rapunzel* implicitly suggest that the role of women is to be beautiful, hard-working, and patient – waiting to be rescued by a handsome male...hero!

Thank God for Shrek – which was released in 2001! Though it was filled with humorous moments, it turned upside down some unhelpful stereotypes. In that movie Princess Fiona was not only better at fighting than Shrek, she was smarter and more emotionally intelligent. In a refreshing twist at the end of the movie, she chose to remain a large green ogre rather than change to a slender young woman. I still struggle a bit with the scene in which Fiona easily defeated Robin Hood and his Merry Men...but, counselling has helped me with this over the years!

For those of us who have been blessed to raise daughters from the 1990s onwards, there have been a growing number of culturally diverse female hero protagonists in popular culture for them, and for the rest of us, to be inspired by. These include historical figures, such as Pocahontas and Mulan; characters inspired by historical people and artefacts, such as Merida (*Brave*) and Moana, and other well-known fictional characters such as Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*).

But this culture shift in story-telling has not been limited to animation. In the 1990 movie *Pretty Woman* – eleven years before Shrek was released – Edward overcame his fear of heights to climb a fire escape, and asked Vivian to stay with him. Slightly mocking, he asks her, “What happens after the prince climbs up and rescues the princess?”, to which Vivian responds firmly, “She rescues him right back!” It’s inspiring! It’s beautiful! And...I think it’s fundamentally flawed! Because the inference in that movie ending is the explicit line at the end of many fairy tales: “And they lived...happily ever after!”

Don’t get me wrong – I love happy endings, but life is more complex than that! We know that there are rich and beautiful times in a relationship; times where there is harmony, shared purpose, and joy...but, there can also be times of exhausting conflict. There can be dissonance about values, in-laws, and whether the toilet seat is left up or down! There can be disagreement about money and addictions, and whether the toothpaste should be squeezed from the middle or the bottom of the tube!

Sometimes the dissonance and the differences become so toxic that even after counselling and prayer, a single journey needs to become two separate journeys. It is never an easy decision and when it happens, each party can be left feeling vulnerable, wounded, and broken. How could they possibly risk love, trust, and intimacy again? Our fairy tale ‘happily ever after’ aspiration has let us down, and we might feel like failures – unable to match the fictional heroes and heroines of our childhood stories.

But, in that space the stories of Christian faith, not fairy tales, become incredibly life-giving because they remind us of the One who knows us best, and loves us the most. Remember the story of our faith which speaks of a God who seeks us out when we're lost – the Good Shepherd who carries us home. The story of our faith in which the Prodigal always finds a welcoming embrace, and a new beginning. The story of our faith, which suggests that those who mourn will be comforted, and that those who hunger and thirst will be filled.

The story of our faith that trusts God to transform death into life, endings into beginnings, and...even brings love out of the ashes. What are your thoughts?

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Owning and grounding: how to engage young people in faith discussions

Ever felt like you disagreed with someone, but didn't bring up your point of view because you didn't want to upset them? Or didn't mention your faith because you thought you'd cause offence?

One thing is for sure, we're not so good at conflict situations these days and we mostly try to avoid them wherever possible. Yet one look at the news tells us we're practically swimming in conflict all the time, whether in the political world or even at times within the Church.

Some experts suggest that the reason most of us are a bit reticent to talk about our faith with friends who don't go to church is that we're scared of conflict. We reason that it's more polite not to bring up faith stuff because we might offend other people.

But what if there was a way to talk about our beliefs without offending anyone and build better relationships at the same time? People at the forefront of appropriate public sharing of faith, our state school Religious Instruction experts, tell us this is possible. In that sphere, being upfront but not aggressive is the key. And it's not necessarily *what* is said but *how* the message is shared that's important.

These experts talk about two language techniques that enable gentle yet clear sharing of faith ideas with anyone. These are called 'Owning' and 'Grounding'.

When we 'own' a belief statement, we claim it as something we believe. We might start that sentence with "I believe..." or "It seems to me...". By doing this we're not telling someone else that they must agree. Rather, using this language tends to open up dialogue between people. The other person is often prompted to share what they believe on the same topic. Possibly they'll agree or possibly not. But, they will not be offended because there is no sense of judgment. Instead, this is a conversation, a dialogue where two people have shared their points of view and learned from each other.

'Grounding' involves the big picture version of the same thing. When we 'ground' a statement we attach it to the group or source who believes it. We might say "Many Christians believe..." or "For Anglicans..." or "1 Corinthians 13 says 'Love is ...'". In doing so, we make it clear just who holds a particular belief. So, once again we're not suggesting the person we're chatting with has to agree. They can respond from their own beliefs at that point. Being able to 'ground' well means we need to know a little bit about our faith, so we should always be a part of learning opportunities at church and beyond.

The experience of experts suggests that owning and grounding are great ways to help people feel more confident in talking about their faith. Not only that, but they encourage dialogue, better relationships and are more likely to lead to acceptance of the ideas shared.

Try out owning and grounding in your day-to-day conversation. These are techniques that work whenever we chat about things we believe in. It can take a little bit to get used to it, but positive results can be expected!