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Living By Story A Counselor's Creed

BY DON HUDSON

"I don't want to live anymore."
The man slumped in his chair staring at me with vacant eyes. In the five years I have been counseling, a number of clients have threatened suicide. Naturally, my mind raced through past clients and their eyes. But this man was different. His eyes were different.

Most people who threaten suicide do so with great emotion, even to the point of melodrama. Strangely, the man sitting across from me had not only lost his passion to live but somehow his passion to die. I searched for the right thing to say to him. What words could I offer to a man who had lost all hope?

"Has anything happened recently to make you feel this way?" was all I could muster.

"Yes," he answered in a monotone. "Last Tuesday it rained. That was the last straw." A bizarre response, but I understood. My mind slipped back to many of my own rainy days — dark days that had sealed a series of heartbreaks. That rainy Tuesday symbolized the final injury to this man.

"I think I understand," I replied. "But this is our first time together so, of course, I don't know you well. Tell me a little bit about yourself." I was asking him to tell his story. I had hesitated until now because I knew this man had a very bad story.

As I expected, for thirty-five minutes he told one of the worst stories I have ever heard. He had a father who exploded into rages and beat him violently from the age of six to seventeen. When he was thirteen, he confided to his pastor in sheer desperation. But the pastor did not believe him. Instead, he called the boy's father and told him his son was spreading lies. His father brutally beat him for the indiscretion.

He told more stories that I could hardly bear to hear. Then he skipped to the past two months. Though he was now forty, he could not bring himself to marry the woman he had dated for years. He no longer attended church, because he could not believe in a God his father claimed to follow. To make matters worse, he also was failing in his job and friendships. "My life has fallen to pieces," he concluded. And with that he ended his story.

The man sitting across from me wanted to forget his tragic past. Indeed, it was because of his past suffering that he felt incapable of loving anyone now. And worse yet, he held no hope for the future. The bright glow of life had been snuffed out by a violent

father. And now I saw before me a man who felt condemned to a meaningless life.

We live in a world of many odd-shaped pieces, a cosmic jigsaw puzzle that often seems to have been further complicated by cruel fate. Yet, no matter what our stories may be, each of us tries to make sense of life by seeing it as a whole. We want to know that we are not alone and that our suffering has meaning. We yearn to live well in our relationships. We fret over our children, our jobs, death. Yet, most of us fail to see far enough beyond our day-to-day, fragmented lives to envision a bigger picture of reality. The past, present and future are three ill-fitted fragments that appear to be hopelessly disconnected.

This is where story comes in. The philosophers tell us that humanity has consistently asked three questions: Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? In other words, we are intimately concerned with our past, present and future — *with our story.*

Story is the only medium that answers all three questions. Rules and law can't, because they merely tell us what to do, not where we come from. Principles can't, because they also guide us in what to do, but they never tell us why we are here. Platitudes can't, because they tell us how to act and bring only superficial closure to our existence. Indeed, rules, principles and platitudes, by themselves, have the unfortunate effect of replacing mystery with a deadening sense of security.

I want something in my life that changes me but does not restrain or control me — something that allows me to live out my own uniqueness. Story does that. Story gathers up the chaotic shards of the past and gives them a future. And it whispers that we are not alone in our questions and pain.

When we are in the midst of suffering, we begin to look outside of ourselves for meaning, for a bigger picture. We look for a story that makes sense of our lives. So, what story do I invite people to? I encourage them to refamiliarize themselves with their own story, where they came from and why they are here. And I believe we all must see our stories through the veil of the story of God.

I find it interesting that seventy-five percent of the Bible is story: Genesis through Revelation is a beautiful romance that tells us where we are from, how we should live and where we are going. I say we must remember, and not forget, the faith of Abraham, the duplicity of Jacob, the jealousy of Saul, the depression of Elijah, the friendship of Jonathan, the kindness of God to Hagar. These stories help bring meaning to our lives by showing that there is a greater order to — and even within — the chaos we see in life.

Gertrude Mueller Nelson, the author of *Here All Dwell Free*, gives us a pertinent warning: "Know your story or your story will live you." The man of whom I wrote in the beginning eventually found hope by realizing he was living a myth. His tragic story had become more real to him than God was; and though his story was truly awful, he had let the suffering of his life dictate his actions and beliefs. He wanted to forget his story — but, in his trying to do so, his story was living him instead.

Counseling did not "fix" this man. The illusion of counseling is that we can be fixed in this life. No, I called this man to much more than that. I offered him story — and story does not remove suffering but *redeems* it. Story pillages suffering's most seductive illusion — that the present moment is the only moment that matters. ☺

Don Hudson is a graduate school professor and licensed counselor in Morrison, Colo. He conducts a popular seminar called "Living By Story: Romancing the Heart."