

CHAPTER 3

Expeditions into What Is Possible

NARRATIVE LEADERSHIP AND DEEP CHANGE



LAWRENCE PEERS

Where Moses stood, “the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed” (Ex. 3:2). In that holy encounter, he was being summoned into an experience of leadership that he would rather not pursue. After all, he was tending his father-in-law’s flock of sheep, minding the task at hand, he didn’t need anything else to do. But suddenly, out of nowhere, the Holy Presence calls him to move from the placidity of sheep herding to the seemingly unfathomable task of leading a captive people through an exodus and onto a circuitous journey of liberation. Going from herding sheep to herding people is a tremendous personal shift. Everything in Moses’s bones told him he would rather just stay with what he already knew how to do: herding sheep . . . and hiding out!

As religious leaders—clergy and lay alike—we often find ourselves in circumstances not too different from Moses. How often do we prefer the familiar and the safe? How much do we prefer to remain with what is, with no inclination to move toward what is possible? How often as leaders of faith communities do we stay on the edge of our own Red Sea waiting for some miracle to occur before we even budge?

Like Moses, only when we take the plunge of leading do we discover new capacities of self and of faith that were otherwise dormant or underutilized.

Leading as a New Way of Being



Leading change is not just doing something different. It is entering into a new way of being—and from this new way of being can emerge a distinctly new way of leading. That is what Moses's encounter with the blazing bush was all about; it was the beginning of an ontological shift from being a dutiful sheep herder to an empowered leader of a people. Although I doubt that any burning bushes will be appearing on our daily commute from home to office, we too know moments when in order to lead we need to feel called into some qualitatively different ways of being, beyond what is often safe and familiar.

Moving from what is known into a vast uncertainty (the wilderness) with only the slim promise of a new possibility to go toward is all too familiar terrain to any of us attempting to lead change in a congregation.¹ Concurrent with that congregational change is our own journey of change as leaders, which can too often feel like exploring a new territory without a map to guide us.

Leading Narratively



To lead narratively, we leaders must be mindful of the relationship that we choose to have with the congregation's story. Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner, who has examined the dynamics of leaders, reminds us in *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* that "the ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or

she relates or embodies, and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences (or collaborators or followers)."² How one *embodies a story* is distinct from how one's words *relate a story*. For in embodying a story, we *become* that which we tell; we give a glimpse of what is possible. Such an effort requires us to be mindful of the dynamic tension we then initiate between what is and what can be. Gardner, indeed acknowledges that "the stories of the leaders—be they traditional or novel—must compete with many other extant stories and if the new stories are to succeed, they must transplant, suppress, supplement, or in some measure outweigh the earlier stories, as well as contemporary oppositional counterstories."³

Moses not only led the Israelites out of Egypt but also led them to a new understanding of who they were and of what was possible. Along the way Moses too was authoring a new understanding of himself and his role in this pilgrimage of leading a throng of captives into becoming the people of a covenant.

So, we will explore here some practices for leading narratively that are drawn from my applications of narrative therapy to congregational settings. I will illustrate these through case examples from my consulting and coaching practice. Along the way, we will come to understand that as leaders we always have a choice about the relationship we have with the congregation's dominant story about itself. In order to lead, we must be able to honor the story as well as shape the story of the congregation. To lead we must point—in our interactions and in our embodiment of our leadership—to some alternate ways of acting and *ways of being* that hold promise and possibility.

Navigating Expeditions of What Is Possible



I have found within narrative therapy some insight and guidance for how as leaders we might lead narratively through the

uncertain terrain of change and toward new possibilities in our congregations. Michael White, a founder of narrative therapy, in his last book, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, states what can describe our own experiences of leading purposeful change within congregations:

My lifelong fascination for maps has led me to look at them as a metaphor for my work with people who consult me about a range of concerns, dilemmas, and problems. When we sit down together I know that we are embarking on a journey to a destination that cannot be precisely specified, and via routes that cannot be predetermined. . . . And I know that the adventures to be had on these journeys are not about the confirmation of what is already known, but about expeditions into what is possible for people to know about their lives.⁴

White's remarks, offered before his untimely death, call for some practical directions as we embark on "expeditions into what is possible," not just for the congregations we lead but also for ourselves as leaders. In fact, for us to effect deep change—that is, change that is not just episodic and on the surface but change that is generative and transformative—we need to reauthor our own leadership. In so doing, we are not merely agents of change but, like Moses, we ourselves are changed.

Our leadership role can go through dramatic shifts, not just because of what we *do*, but because of how we *are* in relationship to the congregation's story. As a narrative leader, we may find that if we identify the dominant story of the congregation as a problem-oriented story, we can be tempted to *be* a problem solver. In such a role, we are merely a character in a plot that is already established. Or, we can consciously and intentionally work with the congregation to identify neglected events and exceptions to the dominant story. By linking these yet-to-be-storied events, our role shifts to becoming a composer or coauthor with the congregation of a new story. When we focus the

conversation in the congregation on possibilities and new directions, our role shifts to being a midwife to a new vision.

As narrative leaders, we must be aware of what kind of narrators we are—and not only the stories we tell. Do we tend to focus on *what is* and tell the story from the role of a problem solver or rescuer in the story? Or, are we also able to stand outside that story and define our practices as composers, coauthors, or midwives to *what can be*? Obviously, as leaders within a congregation we can't avoid being part of the congregation's story. However, in order to lead we may also need to define ourselves in a different relationship to the dominant story. Let's explore together what that might look like.

Observing and Not Just Telling the Story



As part of my work in narrative leadership, I often ask leaders of faith communities to acknowledge that they are already swimming in a narrative they have about the congregation. I ask these leaders to imagine this inner chatter, this narrative, as a constant stream of words and sentences that flows through them and around them. Then I instruct them to reach out into this imaginary stream with their hand and randomly snatch a "line" from that inner story that they have about the congregation. As they hold that imaginary line from the story in one hand, I ask them to observe that line. What is that line? What is the mood of that line? How does that line fit into a larger story that they or members have about the congregation? Who else tends to tell this story about the congregation? How does this line typically lead to what comes next in their story? Such a simple (and perhaps ridiculous) exercise makes us aware that even the most random sentences from our inner conversations are fragments of a larger story that a congregation has com-

posed about itself, or that we have participated in composing and sometimes enshrining.

Taking this imaginative exercise one step further, I then ask clergy as they are imaginatively holding the particular line from their story of the congregation, "What is the story about the story you are telling?" Here we recognize that our hermeneutics, our interpretation of the story, usually fits into some larger story that we inherit or embrace. As leaders, we do hold our congregational stories in particular ways. The ways we hold or interpret those stories affect not only what we do but also who we are as characters in that story.

James Hopewell's *Congregations: Stories and Structures* is a classic in the congregational studies field because he claims that some congregations tell a story from a worldview that can be comic, tragic, romantic, or ironic, or some combination of these modes of literature.⁵ Hence *the story about the story* makes people aware that the story is headed somewhere, that it is telling something not only about the congregation but also about the worldview of the narrator. What is the genre of the story the leaders tend to tell of the congregation? What is the worldview conveyed in the story you tell or that is told? How does your own worldview compare to that of the congregation? Are you romantics or cynics together? Do you share a comic or a tragic worldview of the events of the congregation? What is the impact of these similar or different worldviews on how you lead?

In a recent gathering of clergy, a pastor realized that she tended to look at all the ways laypeople in her congregation fell short of their commitments. She became what she called a micromanager, creating a great deal of stress in her life and reinforcing her story that "you can't trust lay leaders to follow up." When encouraged to look at the big picture outside her own story, she realized that the story was just as much about her as it was about them. When the lay members didn't follow through, it confirmed her suspicions about laypeople not taking their responsibilities or their faith seriously. Her tendency

to be the rescuer and save the day when others didn't follow through made her the hero in her tragic story about them—and about her. When she recognized that her hero or rescuer role was part of her tragic story, she realized she was part of the problem. Desiring to be in a relationship of trust with them, she was open to being coached into a new role that she called "an equipper," as in equipping the saints (Eph. 4:12). From this new narrative, she shifted her perspective of lay leaders and of her own role. She began to see all the ways she could encourage them and pass on skills. She imagined the lay leaders gradually owning their particular way of doing things and of leading.

As she shifted her narrative, her shoulders dropped, her jaw relaxed, her gaze softened. She was embodying her leadership in a new way, right before our eyes. From this new embodiment of her role, she gradually began to realize that there were already exceptions to the story she tended to tell about the lay-people in the congregation. She began to recognize that there were a myriad of ways in which they already did take on responsibilities and do things in their own way, even if it was not her way. These actual, real-life exceptions did not fit into the familiar story she told about them and about herself. Releasing herself from the dilemma of being a rescuer or the hero, she stepped into another story that started a new "expedition into what was possible" for her own leadership. I suspect that something new is happening in the congregation as well.

Noticing Your Relationship to the Problem-Saturated Story



Often the dominant story that takes hold in congregations in need of deep change is what is known in narrative therapy as the "problem-saturated story," or one in which the focus is on who or what has been going wrong. A problem-saturated story

has a momentum of its own. Often, telling the problem-saturated story about the congregational situation has a trance-like effect. The story is reinforcing. People see only those things that reinforce the story. Whatever is contradictory to this story is not seen and therefore goes “unstoried.” This type of story can be recognized in a group when someone offers an example of how difficult or awful something is in the congregation, and before you know it, the rest of the group can’t help but chime in with more evidence for how truly bad and impossible the situation is. We can almost hear ourselves saying, “You think that’s bad? Let me tell you how it is even worse than that!”

Problem-saturated stories have the impact of fact rather than being taken as a narrative crafted by a particular sifting of facts. As leaders we can easily succumb to the power of the problem-saturated story or even become its primary storyteller. For example, I have often noticed in clergy groups that a pastor or rabbi will tell a story about his or her congregation and seek support from others. In response to some well-intentioned advice from colleagues, the clergyperson, who originally asked for help, often goes deeper into why all these suggestions wouldn’t work or delves into more shadowy dimensions of the problem story. At this point even the helpers may chime in with sympathetic remarks about how desperate and despairing situations like this—or all congregations—can be.

When we are so immersed in our story about the congregation, we often can’t step outside of that story. If we cannot truly observe, we cannot truly lead. Ron Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, often talks about this capacity of observing as stepping outside the “dance of activity” in order to take a “balcony perspective.” The tools and perspectives of narrative therapy are especially useful in helping clergy begin to get up on “the balcony” and become different observers of their situations, allowing the possibility of different actions and leading to different results.

One modern midrash on Moses's story states, "The miracle may not be that Moses encountered a burning bush, but that he paused long enough to notice it was there."⁶ The very shift from being immersed in the dominant story to being a keen observer of the stories that are told, and that we tell, makes us less oblivious as leaders. Who knows how many burning bushes exist within our daily lives as religious leaders, sparking opportunities and possibilities that go unnoticed because we would rather not see them or because we don't see beyond our customary narratives of the congregation.

Attending to Your Inner Conversation



Moses's task of moving the people of Israel from the familiarity of Egypt, through the massive uncertainty of the wilderness, toward some unknown promised land required him to change his own understanding of himself even as the once-captive people were gaining a new identity and a new way of being.

Such a call to leadership required a significant shift not only in what he was doing but also in Moses's way of being—an ontological shift.⁷ Likewise, any deep change has accompanying inner work for ourselves as leaders. Moses's inner work is recorded in Scripture as his list of objections. He claims to be unworthy, he points to his own lack of eloquence, he presents a case for why he should be replaced by someone else. These are only the points recorded in the story. Who knows the myriad ways he may have felt inadequate to the task or what other ways he may have argued that he was not the one to lead.

When we face the prospect of significant change, as religious leaders we may hear echoes of our own voices within Moses's objections. The inner conversations with ourselves or with our God may boil down to "Why me?" or, "Are you sure you have the

right person?" Yet, underlying our case for why we are not up to the task is a keen understanding that leading change requires an ontological shift from our present way of being toward a new way of being and of leading. Like Moses, we may move toward that ontological shift—kicking and screaming—because it also means that we have to shed our own familiar narrative about ourselves and our congregation.

In my coaching with clergy, many of whom face new leadership challenges, the inner conversations (or stories) they are having about these challenges are as important as their presentation of what is going on in the congregation. In other words, the clergy person's inner changes include shifts in how he or she observes and not just what he or she is observing. Before we as religious leaders dare to cross the threshold of leading through purposeful change, we have to ask ourselves the fundamental questions, "Am I up to it?" and "Am I as a leader willing to make the shifts I need to make in order to lead?" Only at this fundamental level of personal reckoning can leaders begin to embark on the journey of leadership. What we hope will be a smooth cruise to the promised land can be a long and winding route through uncertainty, and we need to prepare ourselves first. The quarreling and grumbling we anticipate among our congregations as they face deep change can make the Israelites' incessant grumbling in the wilderness seem like mere singing in the choir.

Using Narrative Therapy Approaches with Problem-Saturated Stories



Leaders who make the necessary inner shift and stand outside the dominant, problem-saturated story as an observer will find that narrative therapy offers a number of techniques that can help them navigate the change process in the congregation.

These distinctive techniques are far different from the push-pull dynamic that characterizes many congregational change efforts. Rather, they serve as frameworks that can help religious leaders not only avoid some common pitfalls but also shift the conversation in ways that reveal possibilities and directions that might otherwise be obscured.

Ask Questions that Reveal “Unstoried” Events

One technique narrative leaders can employ with congregations is to identify other stories in the congregation that are often, up to this point, unstoried.

To begin constructing alternatives to the problem-saturated story, I ask questions such as these, adapted from narrative therapy, that often help people get a peek at things outside that particular story:

- When would you say you do not have the complaint about the congregation?
- Are there times when the problem is not present?
- How do you explain the times when the problem is not present?
- What is different about the times when the complaint is not present?
- What do you imagine others would say when the complaint is not present?
- What will be the first sign that things are getting better?

These questions help leaders recognize the dynamic of the problem-focused story in ways that can release them from its mesmerizing effect and allow them to stand outside of it. Other times, by taking on a different point of view, leaders recognize that they have been taking only one of many perspectives as an observer. Shifting the observer can often reveal different actions that are available and different results that are possible.

Externalize the Problem rather than Personalize It

A feature of the problem-saturated story is that it often includes a villain, a problem child, an *unmensch*. The situation becomes personalized in such a way that the message becomes, "If only so-and-so would change, all would be well." In my consulting work, I often hear the phrase "those people" used to refer to those considered "the problem children" in the congregation. A consultant's goal is to help a congregation see its situation systematically, to see how everyone is playing some role in keeping a problem situation intact.

I recently heard a story in one church about a woman who had been so disruptive for so long that the other members of the congregation worked overtime to anticipate questions she might ask in a congregational meeting in order to avoid conflict with her. After more than a decade of this, and under the guidance of a new leader, they finally recognized that a disruptive person in a congregation is kept in place by those who, often with good intentions, tolerate this sort of behavior until it is no longer bearable. By using questions from the narrative approach, such as those above, congregations and their leaders begin to see that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem—and, indeed, it is their relationship to the problem that is the problem.

A recent training session I led with a group of rabbis illustrates this shift toward changing one's relationship to the problem. In this training, a new rabbi mentioned how he felt he was being blamed for the fact that in his congregation they could not gather a minyan (a group of at least ten) for evening prayers. The rabbi explained that he was doing his part—he showed up as one of the ten. He called members and asked for their commitment to attend. Invariably, not enough folks showed up, and those who had gathered resented taking the time or felt annoyed at those who did not keep their promises.

Even if they did not explicitly blame the rabbi for the low commitment, he often felt they did.

In the conversation with the rabbi, I shifted the focus from who was to blame (which is often an endless cycle leading nowhere) to an externalizing conversation in which, as Michael White says, "the problem is the problem." An externalizing conversation, according to White, includes describing the problem using the "parlance of the people seeking therapy and that is based on their understanding of life."⁸ Consequently, in this interaction, I picked up on the rabbi's language and began to talk with the rabbi about the "not enough commitment" problem. This allowed us to depersonalize the problem and to begin to talk about the situations in which not enough commitment is present. Then we explored the effects of the problem on the synagogue, on the rabbi, on the people in the synagogue, and so forth. In narrative therapy this is called "mapping the effects of the problem." From there we could evaluate whether the effects of this problem were welcome or not, and if not, why not.

As our conversation proceeded, we realized that there were indeed times that the not-enough-commitment problem was not present, such as on high holy days, at memorial services, and especially at family events. We then talked about what was present in these alternate exceptions to the problem circumstances. The rabbi was able to see that people found something meaningful in these events; or that generations of commitment and loyalty supported people in making the commitment to those events in which they did show up. By looking at the exceptions, he saw that he could refocus his efforts on the alternate story—that is, what contributes to the not-enough-commitment problem not being present in the life of the synagogue.

Because the rabbi not only stood outside of the problem but also took on the role of a different observer of the situation, he saw a whole range of new actions that could lead to some new results that built upon what people actually valued. He

discovered more possibilities for how he could lead and what he could teach.

Construct an Alternate Story

Once people can externalize the problem they are facing, often they are also freed up to recognize more of the situation than is usually permitted in typical discourses about “what’s wrong with this congregation.” In externalizing conversations, often a new kind of conversation begins to emerge. These “reauthoring conversations,” White explains, “invite people to continue to develop and tell stories about their lives, but they also help people to include some of the more neglected but potentially significant events and experiences that are ‘out of phase’ with their dominant storylines. These events and experiences can be considered ‘unique outcomes’ or ‘exceptions.’”⁹

I worked with one congregation badly in need of redevelopment, given that its membership was graying and its endowment was shrinking. Congregation members told the story of how every time they tried some growth initiative it would be met with an effort by some members to sabotage or undermine it. Consequently, they felt caught and at an impasse. The image that emerged in our conversations was that they had a “finger-trap problem.” They had a tendency to pull in opposite directions when change occurred—and this kept them trapped, much like the child’s toy known as a finger trap.¹⁰

We focused on the effects of this finger-trap problem and mapped the effects of this problem on their faith community, on its capacity to grow, and on its ability to initiate change. Congregants readily agreed that they did not like the effects of this recurring problem because it kept the congregation trapped, preventing it from moving forward, and the experience became painful over time. People tended to stay in their factions, reacting to each other and finding the push and pull more engaging than the effort to pull in the same direction.

We then explored all the times in the congregation's life when the finger-trap problem was not present. We looked at what people were *doing* as a congregation during the times when the finger-trap problem was not prevalent. White calls this mapping the "landscape of action."¹¹ One example was the time the church's youth organized a benefit for the victims of the 2006 tsunami disaster. Without exception, members of the church supported their efforts, even when the youth were promoting music and inviting people to the church that did not fit the congregation's stereotyped understanding of itself. People in the congregation worked together in spite of their differences. The event was successful not only as a fundraiser but also as an event in which the congregation acted as a whole. This was an example of the congregation *pulling together* in the same direction, an exception to its finger-trap problem.

"What would the youth of this church, who saw you as a congregation act so readily and cooperatively in their fundraising project, say about you as a congregation?" I asked. This and other reauthoring questions helped congregants see that an alternate story was possible, and that the dynamics of the alternate story about the congregation were different than the dominant, problem-saturated story about the congregation they had held in the past.

Describing New Possibilities



In the time of the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people, the prophet Jeremiah could have commiserated with the problem-saturated story of a people who were in despair, far from home, and in captivity once again. Instead, he spoke the prophetic word: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage,

that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5–7).

In essence Jeremiah was saying, "Don't cave in to your sense of despair and hopelessness." He reminded them who they were outside of the problem and encouraged them to do what they knew how to do when they were not in exile: plant gardens, start families, and promote the well-being of the place where they dwelled. These actions were the start of a new story. Jeremiah was prophetically helping the people of Israel reauthor their story in the midst of exile.

The psalmist ponders, "But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?" As religious leaders, we too ponder how we can sing in the midst of turmoil. A narrative leader must dare to be as prophetic as Jeremiah. Even in the midst of trouble or uncertainty, as narrative leaders we must be able to help others stand outside the mesmerizing effects of the problem-saturated story. As narrative leaders, we must be resilient and resourceful enough to resist internalizing the situation. By recognizing that the problem is the problem, as leaders we can facilitate a conversation that studies with curiosity the dynamic effects of this problem on the health, capacities, and faithfulness of the congregation.

Shifting the congregation's relationship to the problem comes only when its members can examine these effects and deeply and resoundingly say, "No, we don't want to continue with these effects of the problem." A narrative leader uses questions to help point a congregation toward the possibilities and directions inherent in a situation but often obscured by people's usual problem-saturated and personalizing approaches to the situation. As narrative leaders we provoke the alternate story by asking, "What would you like instead? Where would you like to be headed?" "What would be the first sign that we

are moving in the new direction?" Then a threshold to a new possibility for the congregation emerges.

The cumulative effect of this process, rather than a dead end, is a congregational conversation of possibilities. Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Turning to One Another*, underlines the role of leaders in creating powerful conversations that can promote deep change: "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about. Ask, 'What's possible?' not 'What's wrong?' Keep asking. . . . Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters."¹² Narrative leaders lead expeditions into what is possible by their willingness to elicit alternate, generative stories that point to possibilities more than problems. In so doing, they shift their ways of being a leader and the congregation's way of being.

NOTES



1. Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998).

2. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 14.

3. Ibid.

4. Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 6.

5. James F. Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

6. A paraphrase from Marc Gellman's *Does God Have a Big Toe? Stories About Stories in the Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989).

7. Alan Seiler, *Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change*, vol. 1 (Victoria, Australia: Newfield Australia, 2005).

8. Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 41.

9. White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 61.

10. Also known as a Chinese finger trap or Mexican handcuffs.

11. White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 99–100.

12. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002).