

The Problem Trap

A Narrative Therapy Approach to Escaping Our Limiting Stories

by Lawrence Peers

In my work as a congregational consultant, I have discovered that narrative therapy offers a number of lessons that can help church leaders navigate the change process in some distinctive ways beyond the push-pull dynamic that characterizes many congregational change efforts. These frameworks can help congregational leaders to not only avoid some common pitfalls but also to shift the conversation in ways that reveal possibilities and directions that would otherwise be obscured by some of the typical congregational dynamics and patterns of interaction around change.

To effect deep change, leaders must be able to stand outside the dominant story of whatever it is we are trying to change—rather than being so immersed in it that we cannot truly observe how to lead this particular group in this particular situation. Ron Heifetz often talks about this as being able to take a balcony perspective. I have found the tools and perspectives of narrative therapy especially useful in helping clergy begin to get up on the balcony and become different observers of their situations, allowing for different actions and different results to become possible.

Recognizing the Problem-Saturated Story

One of the primary kinds of stories that takes hold in congregations and makes change difficult is what is known in narrative therapy as the “problem-saturated story,” or one in which the focus is on who or what is or has been wrong.

A problem-saturated story has a dynamic of its own. Often when we are telling a problem-saturated story about our congregational situation it has a trance-like effect. The story is reinforcing. We “see” only those things that reinforce the story. Whatever is contradictory to this problem-saturated story goes un-storied and is not “seen.”

You can recognize the problem-saturated story when you’re in a group where someone offers an example of how difficult or awful something is in the congregation and before you know it the rest of us can’t help but chime in with more evidence for how truly bad and impossible the situation is. We can almost hear ourselves saying, even if the words aren’t verbalized, “You think that’s bad, let me tell you how it is even worse than that!”

Problem-saturated stories have the impact of being taken as fact rather than as a narrative created by a particular sifting of facts.

As leaders, we can easily succumb to the power of the problem-saturated story and, in fact, can become the main storyteller—if not the main character—in many of these stories. 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 often goes deeper into why these

suggestions wouldn't work—or delves into more of the problem story. At this point even the helpers may chime in with sympathetic remarks about how desperate and despairing situations like this can be.

In moments like these, I help to spoil the pity party. I ask questions like, “What would someone else in the congregation say? What would the newest or longest member of the congregation say about this situation?” “What would a child say?” or, better yet, “What would someone who disagrees with your version of events say about this situation?”

In asking these obnoxious questions, I am merely trying to point out the possibility of multiple perspectives and to introduce various versions of the story in order to interrupt the trance of the problem-saturated story, at least momentarily. I also want to give the clergyperson an opportunity to take on the perspective of a different observer.

Sometimes just recognizing the dynamic of the problem-saturated story can release people from its mesmerizing effect and allow them to stand outside of it. Other times, taking on a different perspective allows the leader to recognize that the observer they have been offers only one of many perspectives. Shifting the observer can often reveal different actions that are available and different results that are possible.

In a recent gathering, a pastor realized that she tended to look at all the ways laypeople fell short of their commitments. She became the “micromanager” in a way that created a great deal of stress in her life and reinforced her story that “you can't trust lay leaders to follow up.” When encouraged to look at the big picture outside of her own story, she realized that she was a character in the story she was creating (a story in which, by the way, she tended to be the “rescuer” and save the day when others didn't follow through). Her constant nagging and her mistrust produced the congregation's dependency on her constant prodding. When she realized that she could be an “equipper” (as in “equipping the saints”), her observer shifted. She began to see all the ways that she could encourage and pass on skill and then let lay leaders own their own way of doing things. She relaxed and then realized that there were already exceptions to the problem-oriented story she tended to tell.

Any effort of a congregation that is motivated only by the problem-saturated version of its story can propel the congregation in a direction of change that may be misguided or limited. All the more reason for a leader to be consciously aware of the problem-saturated story—and to be intentional about other ways to interact about a congregational situation.

Externalizing versus Personalizing

A feature of the problem-saturated story within a congregation is that often there is a villain, a problem child, an *unmensch*.

There is usually a tendency to personalize what is going on in such a way that conveys the message that if only “so and so” would change all would be well. In congregations, the tendency is to give this distinguished place of dishonor to the clergy or to a group of

leaders, a group within the congregation, or even an individual. In my consulting work, I often hear the phrase “those people” used to refer to those considered the “problem children” in the congregation.

The role of a consultant is often to help a congregation see their situation systemically, to see how everyone is playing some role in keeping a problem situation intact. Recently, I heard a story about a woman who had been disruptive within a congregation for so long that the other members of the congregation worked overtime to anticipate questions she might ask so as to avoid conflict with her. After more than a decade of this, and under the guidance of a new leader, they were finally recognizing 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.

From narrative training, we begin to see that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem—and, indeed, it is our relationship to the problem that is the problem. A shift toward changing one’s relationship to the problem was apparent in a recent training with rabbis. 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 10) for evening prayers. The rabbi explained that he was doing his part—he showed up as one of the 10. 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 that they did.

In the conversation with the rabbi, I shifted the focus from who was to blame (an endless cycle leading nowhere) to an externalizing conversation. As Michael White, one of the originators of narrative therapy, says, an externalizing conversation includes describing the problem using the “parlance of the people seeking therapy and that is based on their understanding of life.”¹

In this interaction, I 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 when “not enough commitment” is present. Then we explored the effects of “not enough commitment” on the synagogue, on the rabbi, on the people in the synagogue, etc. 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 times when the problem, “not enough commitment,” 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 circumstances. The rabbi was able to see that people found something meaningful in these events; there were generations of commitment and loyalty that supported people in making the commitment to these high holy days services. This allowed him to see that he could refocus his efforts on the alternate story of what contributes to “not enough commitment” *not* being present in the life of the synagogue. This allowed him to

stand outside of the problem-saturated story and to see more possibilities for how he could lead and what he could teach.

Clearly, this conversation allowed the rabbi to not only stand outside of the problem but to also take on the role of a different observer of the situation. By doing so he saw a whole range of new actions that could lead to some new results.

Seeing the Exceptions

Once leaders can externalize the problem they are facing, what often happens is that the leadership is also freed up to recognize more of the situation than is usually allowed in our typical discourses about “what’s wrong with this congregation.” In the externalizing conversations, often a new kind of conversation—what White calls a “reauthorizing conversation”—begins to emerge. “Reauthoring conversations,” he 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.’”²

In a consultation with a congregation that was badly in need of redevelopment since its membership was graying and its endowment was shrinking, the congregation told the story of how every time they tried some growth initiative it would be met with an effort to sabotage or undermine the effort. Consequently, they felt caught and in an impasse. The image that emerged in our conversations was that they had a “finger-trap problem,” where pulling in opposite directions kept them trapped, much like the child’s toy known as a finger trap.³

We focused on the effects of this finger-trap problem, mapping its effects on their community, on their capacity to grow, and on their ability to initiate change. The congregation readily agreed that they did not like the effects of this recurring problem because it kept them “trapped,” didn’t allow them to move forward, and it was simply painful. 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 life of the congregation when the finger-trap problem was not present. We looked at what White calls the “landscape of action,”⁴ what they were *doing* as a congregation during the “exceptional” times when their finger-trap problem was not prevalent. One clear example was the time when the youth of the church organized a benefit for the victims of the tsunami disaster in 2006. Without exception, members of the church supported their efforts—even when they were promoting music and inviting people to the church who did not fit their stereotyped understanding of themselves. People in the congregation worked together in spite of their differences. The event was successful not only as a fundraiser but also as a congregation-acting-as-a-whole event. This was an example of their “pulling together in the same direction,” an exception to their finger-trap problem.

“What would the youth of this church, who saw you as a congregation act so readily and cooperatively to their fundraising project, say about you as a congregation?” I asked. This and other reauthoring questions allowed them to see that an alternate story was possible and that there were dynamics to the alternate story that were different than their dominant, problem- saturated story about themselves.

Singing the Songs of the Lord

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 to dwell in; plant gardens, and eat their fruits.

Take wives and beget sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters. There you must increase in number, not decrease.

Promote the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the Lord, for upon its welfare depends your own. ⁵

In essence, he was saying, “Don’t cave in to your sense of despair and hopelessness.” He reminded them of 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 to “reauthor” their story in the midst of exile.

The Psalmist ponders, “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalms 137:4). 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, the narrative leader must be able to help others stand outside the mesmerizing effects of the problem-saturated story. The narrative leader must be resilient and resourceful enough to resist internalizing the situation. Instead, by recognizing that the “problem is the problem,” the conversation the leader can facilitate is one that studies with curiosity the dynamic effects of this problem on the health, capacities, and faithfulness of the congregation.

Shifting the relationship to the problem comes only when the congregation can examine these effects and deeply and resoundingly say, “No, we don’t want to continue with these effects of the problem.” Then a threshold to a new possibility for the congregation emerges. This new threshold arises when the leader is able to ask, “What would you like instead? Where would you like to be headed?” “What would be the first sign that we are moving in that new direction?”

A narrative leader uses questions to help point a congregation toward the possibilities and directions that are inherent in a situation but often obscured by our usual problem-saturated and internalizing approaches to the situation.

The cumulative effect of the steps outlined here allow for a conversation of possibilities to emerge in what would otherwise seem like a dead-end. Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Turning to One Another*, underlines the power of conversation and the role of leaders in creating the kinds of 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. ⁶

NOTES

1. Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 41.
2. White, 61.
3. Also known as a "Chinese finger trap" or "Mexican handcuffs."
4. White, 99–100.
5. Jeremiah 29: 5-7, *New American Bible*.
6. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), 145.

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