



We Have to Learn to Listen Differently:
Further Conversation on Storytelling
September 23, 2026

Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman, and I'm quite pleased to be with my colleagues, Ryan Bonfiglio and Jennifer Watley Maxell, and also someone we've had on the podcast many times, Heather Brown. I'm thrilled to have her with us. And we are, in a sense, continuing a conversation about storytelling, really from 30,000 feet, but also at a very granular level, and a very rich conversation that we already started, and highly encourage you to listen to part one of this if you haven't already.

Ryan Bonfiglio: I want to go back to you, Heather, because you did this thing in your church in Asheville, where it sounds like, to me, that you created an environment and a context in which the sort of unedited authentic storytelling, that both Adam and Jennifer are talking about, could happen. Tell us more about that. What was the environment? What were the ingredients that helped that authenticity begin to bubble up and come out through the storytelling?

Heather Brown: Great question, Ryan. So for us, what we did is we had two or three people sit in a room with the person who wanted to tell the story and just said, "Tell us the story," so they could get it out. And we just went on the emotional roller coaster with them through all of that. And after we listened to the story, we found we had questions. So we just started asking questions: "Tell us more about this" or "How did this impact your response?"

And they really fed into that. The storytellers fed into that, like, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay." And so we did that. We would separate for a little while, we'd come back and do it again. And now they would add those details or not, and we would have more questions, or not. And by the time we did that two or three times, they were like, "Yeah, I'm ready to go and share this, and it feels good, and it feels poignant, and I can get to the meat of what I'm hoping to share in a more direct way."

Ryan: And, Heather, did you find that either where the room was, or the type of room mattered, or was it just about getting the people together?

Heather: I think it's about the people, because we moved around and did these wherever we could. Sometimes it was in a church office, and sometimes it wasn't. And I think it was really about setting the stage of "we are here for you. We're ready to listen, no matter what you say. We're going to have a smile on our face and support you through the good stuff, the bad stuff, the hard stuff, the stumbling around, trying to figure out how to put your thoughts together." So, I think it really is the people that you put in the room together that does it.

And then, when you go out to share in the world, that environment's totally different. And it's a different setup as well as — if you're trying to do this live: let's make it a place where people can hear, where people feel like it's okay to clap or respond emotionally in some kind of way, and not hide how you're feeling in a corner. We have them all online, but we didn't do it in a podcast form. So I'm not sure how that would change things or not. But, like, even in this room, this virtual room that we're in, I feel very comfortable with you, and I could tell a story with you, and I'm certain that you would smile back at me and give me feedback. And so I think that's totally possible.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: When you were curating these environments...so we've been talking a lot about the storyteller, but the other person in the relationship is the audience, the people who are listening. Was there anything that you did to prepare them or to prep them? I feel like now, especially when we look at social media, people will hear or see a story, and in the comments they just kind of go off, because of the anonymity, and they'll just be very negative. How did you prepare the audience to receive people's stories?

Heather: Yeah, so we always worked around a theme for our story sessions. And so, we would share that upfront. We are...were very liberal with how you fit inside of that theme. And so people knew that they were going to come hear stories about "Never Have I Ever" or whatever the theme is. And then, I think that we just came at it with open hearts to say, "Keep your heart open, keep your mind open." And fortunately for us, we didn't really have any of that negative feedback. But again, it was live, and so there's not that "hide behind a screen and type all these terrible things out at you."

Ryan: And this is in the weeds, Heather, but I think it matters. Am I right that these were unscripted stories? That is, people weren't reading off a page or a screen. And just talk to us about that a little bit.

Heather: Yeah. So we told people if they wanted to write their story down for the first time to sort of collect their thoughts, that's fine. But the hope and expectation is that when we show up for the first time to hear the story, that it's just from you, that you are just telling the story. Now within that, if it meandered around or something like that, we did help teach people beginning, middle, and end, so that there was a structure that people could follow along with. But other than that, they could say whatever they wanted in those directions. We just asked questions to sort of pull out additional details.

Ryan: What I'm hearing is that you're handling with such care, on the one hand, the organic, unscripted, unedited, authentic way of storytelling; but you're also, in some way, trying to help people tell better stories — not tell a different story than what is true, but help tell that true story in ways that are compelling and captivating. Is that right? Would you say that that's a tension you're trying to navigate through this?

Heather: Absolutely. And I think that storytelling is such a part of so many cultures. I mean, we told stories before we had written language, so we are built for storytelling. But I think, with our digital age, and the separation that we've already talked about a little bit of sharing that, people don't know how to tell good stories anymore. Like, I can tell you this experience I had at the grocery store today, okay; but is that a good compelling story and is that really what I want you to know?

Ryan: Yeah. So in that way, there's a particular problem with Christian storytelling for all the reasons you explained before. But I think you're also saying we have a storytelling problem. That's not just Christian. It's more generic. It's broader. We've actually lost the art of telling stories.

I'm mindful of your Appalachian roots, and that we are recording this the day after Dolly Parton's death. And talk about a master storyteller, someone who knew how to tell a story that was sometimes unbelievably authentic in some of the stories Dolly told about her childhood in really abject poverty, but she did it with such artistic poise and flourish. I mean, it was compelling. There's something that she's modeling, and I think all good stories model, is that artfulness and authenticity and how they play off of and balance each other.

Adam: As you all are talking, it also has me thinking about my kids and the daily fight over screen time, which I know every family in the world deals with. But the reason I bring it up is because — I don't want to go too far on a tangent, but I think this gets to your point — that a lot of the research around this for children is that actually the problem is not longer narratives. The problem is not watching movies on your tablet. The problem is not long conversations with someone face-to-face on your computer screen. The problem is short-form reels and ads and shorts. And I say that just to say we actually know what the problem is in the culture, and it's attention spans. It's our inability — or unwillingness — to create spaces and relationships where we can dig into longer arc narratives that captivate and compel. And I have been wondering for quite some time, but now, especially in the context of storytelling, I wonder what the Church's role is in that. I think we've gotten some of that sort of implicitly, but I think about pastors and laypeople and the necessity of creating those types of spaces, practices, liturgies, environments, relationships where we can attend to the longer arc of meaning making.

Jennifer: I think that's a great point, Adam. In my tradition, we grew up — Easter speeches, where you get up and it's either a poem or it's a little narrative chunk about something. And as you got older...you started young, when you're, like, in your toddler-hood, and you have a little two or three line something that you have to memorize. And by the time you get to high school, we had to memorize stanzas of material that we then had to stand up in front of an audience and recite by memory. As a child, and as I'm thinking back on it, like, that was prime storytelling training — and not only storytelling training, but it was prime "get up in front of people as a member of the community".

And, I'll admit, there were years where I studied and studied, and I was on it. And then there were years they were in the wings like, "Don't forget to say..." or, like, feeding me my lines. But whether it was good or bad, I was in that community. Heather, can you just give us a story about either a good time that the storytelling was, like, on point, or that it wasn't and kind of what you did? Or, what did that look like, some of those moments?

Heather: Well, we had a lot of really great stories. I'm biased about that though, because I was involved. But I think some of the more difficult ones were people who, one, weren't confident in sharing what they were going to share. They wanted to share, but weren't confident in it, because they didn't have the skills. They hadn't been in front of people, like you said. And then two, I think that when something's really important, people get nervous. And when that happens, your brain just starts going in all kinds of directions. So we had a couple of sessions where we really had to say, "Okay, sit down, take a deep breath. We see you shaking everywhere, even though it's just the three of us, and it's okay. No matter what you say today, it's okay."

And sort of led them through, "What do you really want to say? What is the point you want to put across? When people walk away from the room, what do you want them to take with them from you in this story?" And we were able to, sort of, help them navigate the storytelling river that way.

And then, we've had other ones that were just people are like, "I've prayed in front of church. I've been a liturgist. I have sung all these places, and I'm just going to get up and do the thing."

And those people are like, "Okay, yes, stay in your time limit. Good job."

People like you and I, Jennifer, who grew up in front of the church from "little" little, we could probably be called on at any point. We'll be called on to pray, tell a story, introduce somebody. They're always going to look at us, because they know we're just going to show up and do it. And a lot of people don't

actually have that history or background. And so, like Ryan was saying before, like, creating that environment that feels safe and kind and available to those people is really important.

Ryan: Heather, storytelling is a...is really only one side of a two-sided interaction between humans. There's the person telling the story, but there's the person listening, too. And I'm wondering in the work that you've done, did you talk with groups about how to listen, and what it means to receive story and interact with story?

Heather: I did not, but that's amazing. I think, too, because we started with our church congregation and so many people were there, they were already open to listening in that kind of way. But it's a good point, because if you don't come in with an open heart and open ears, you can come in with a lot of judgment about whatever somebody's going to say. And not all stories are happy and funny.

Ryan: And what I think happens is, sometimes, when we listen to stories, we are so preoccupied with the story that we want to tell, that we actually don't listen to this story. We're just sort of rehearsing the story that we want to share when it gets to be our turn. So, it's not really dialogical. It's just a bunch of people who've shared siloed stories. And I think the beauty of what you're beginning to describe, and the art of Christian storytelling, is that we have to learn to listen differently. We have to learn to be present with the storyteller, to not rush to our story, not rush to our anecdote that says the same thing or a different thing, but really gets to absorb and sit and be curious with and about the story being told before us. And, in some ways, I'm wondering if the listening part is harder than the storytelling part. Maybe that's where our training needs to come in even more intensely than in the storytelling.

Heather: Yeah. Something that we really focused on was figuring out your first three lines, because if you can't hook people in your first three lines, they're absolutely going to do what you say, Ryan. But when you can get those people's attention in that first 30 seconds, one minute of what you're saying, you can physically watch people change. And that was part of my favorite thing of doing storytelling. I was the emcee as well, but I got to sit back and watch the faces of people as they realize what's happening in the story, what they're learning about this person that they never knew before. And you can see, "Oh yeah, I relate to that. Uh huh. My kid did that. Yes, I had to..." whatever.

So as you think about the storytelling, really, if you can hook someone...so, for example, one of the stories I told, my opening line was, "I mourned the death of my mother for the second time."

That's going to bring somebody in, and they're going to be like, "What? What are you talking about? Somebody died twice?" That's not the point of the story at all. My mother is alive and well. But that kind of grab is really important, I think, for listener-hood.

Jennifer: Ryan, when you asked that question, I thought of two things. One, in my tradition, we have what we call "call and response". When the pastor, or whoever, really, is up leading or preaching or whatever, you'll say, "Ain't God good?"

And then the congregation is like, "Yes. Amen." There's a call, there's a response.

But what I also thought about was comedy, and how comedians are some of the best, most skillful storytellers out there. And to your point, Heather, about the importance of listening, it becomes a conversation. And even when the audience isn't laughing, a good comedian even takes the silence or the awkwardness and figures out a way to work it into the story, so that then there's kind of a laugh that

comes later. Some of my favorite comedians are the ones who pick out stuff that's happening in the audience. They say you're never supposed to sit in the front, because they'll talk about you, and they'll bring you into the story. And even though it's cringey, it's awkward and embarrassing, I think that idea of bringing someone into the story: I'm not just telling a story about myself, but I'm telling a story where you can find your place in it, which is what I think is so powerful about Christian storytelling.

It's not just telling a story about Jesus who died long ago and rose long ago, or God who occupies the space way up in heaven far away, but it's telling the story in a way where people can say, "Oh yeah, me too. Same. I did that. I experienced that. I need that, too." And the idea that the Christian story is unfinished, and that there is room in it for everybody. And so, learning to tell it in a way, learning to listen in a way, where we're listening for the entrée, we're listening for the part to say, "Amen, same, yes, I agree." Like you said, that first line that grabs somebody, and makes them kind of lean in and want to listen more. And I'm curious, were there certain techniques or things that you discussed with people? Were there certain questions that you found kind of led people to be able to do that?

Heather: Yeah. I think that when we got into the "Where do you want to leave people with" conversation, it helped us teach people, encourage people to bring some of that to the front of the story so that they knew where it was going to wind up, but not the whole big reveal.

Adam: From time to time, we do some training with our facilitators about this. And part of it is — I realized for myself, too — that we do some exercises where we want people to pay attention to how they are listening to someone else tell a very short story. And I usually break it into self-oriented, content empathetic, and parasympathetic. It's a fancy way of saying, "Either I'm someone who tends to think about what does this story have to do with me," which is not wrong, but it's one of those registers. Secondly, content empathetic: it's a focus on what's happening, and how might I analyze that, or interpret it or make meaning of it. And then the parasympathetic, what it says is, "Man, I'm really kind of feeling what this person's feeling", and you become very empathetic towards them. And I think the key is just paying more attention to how we listen, and being able to put some language to that: Am I listening to a story in order to really more deeply understand this person? Or am I listening to a story because it has a problem I can fix? You know, things like that, I think, are really important, especially for those of us who are going to be working the next several years with facilitators and pastors in our program. Like we ourselves need to know how to listen, and how to help them listen more carefully.