




CHAPTER 1 •

# STORYTELLING



**“...AND THE STORY CARRIED HIM  
AWAY SO MUCH THAT HE HAD  
TO JUMP AND DANCE...”**

A rabbi, whose grandfather had been a pupil of the Baal Shem Tov, was once asked to tell a story. “A story ought to be told,” [the rabbi] said, “so that it is itself a help,” and his story was this:

“My grandfather was paralyzed. Once he was asked to tell a story about his teacher and he told how the holy Baal Shem Tov used to jump and dance when he was praying. My grandfather stood up while he was telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show how the [the holy Baal Shem Tov] had done it. From that moment, [my grandfather] was healed. This is how stories ought to be told.”

Martin Buber, *Werke III*, Munich: Kösel, 1973, 71



Buber goes on to write, “The story is itself an event and has the quality of a sacred action... The wonder that is narrated becomes powerful once more.” This story demonstrates the power of stories and storytelling because the grandfather is healed of his paralysis in his excitement of retelling a story. We can see that telling stories has the power to transform both the person telling the story and the person listening to the story. In this chapter, we will discuss how being a good storyteller and a good listener is essential to being a good interfaith leader. Then, we will walk through some exercises intended to help you craft an individual story that illustrates why you care about religious pluralism.

## WHY DO WE BEGIN WITH STORIES?

We begin our explanation of the best practices of building religious pluralism by looking at stories because, as the opening story illustrated, they have the power to be transformational. Stories have the power to transform because they are able to do several things effectively:

### FRAME OUR THOUGHTS

Telling a story is a great way to put a larger idea into a more specific context. This makes communicating easier for the storyteller and understanding easier for the listener. An example of this occurs in the opening story: the idea that storytelling is transformative is communicated through a story of transformational storytelling.

## EMPOWER THE STORYTELLER

When people have approached us in the past, expressing their hesitancy about participating in interfaith dialogue because they feel their Sunday school attendance was lax, or they have not really studied the Torah and Talmud, or they do not always do all their daily prayers, we always answer that you do not have to be a scholar of your religious or philosophical perspective to participate. Every participant is already inherently a “scholar of their own experience.” It is okay if you do not know all the details of your religious or philosophical tradition. That is not the expertise from which you are sharing. Rather, you are the expert of your own experience, how you draw meaning from that experience, and how you tell the story of that experience. No one in the world knows what it is like to be you better than you, and it is from that scholarly expertise that we hope you will share and teach.

## ENABLE MUTUALLY APPRECIATIVE ENCOUNTERS

In interfaith dialogue, it is far too easy to discuss topics that may put us at odds with our conversation partners. If we begin an interfaith dialogue by focusing on political or theological tenants, we may find that the conversation does not go very far before we start arguing about who is “right” and who is “wrong.” If, however, we encourage participants to begin with a story from their own lived experience, it is often less threatening for listeners. While they may not have lived the same experience as the storyteller, it is unlikely that they will challenge the veracity of his or her story. Instead, the storyteller is inviting the listeners to share in a piece of his or her experience, even if it is grounded in different beliefs and values. The dialogue is therefore inclusive rather than exclusive and allows for a mutually appreciative encounter. Stories are a crucial tool for enabling people with different identities to interact positively.



## INSPIRE OTHERS

When storytellers are genuinely excited about their story, they can inspire their listeners who can sense that emotion and energy. Listeners are often drawn further into the story by this energy and are better able to understand its universal message. The listeners are also reminded that they, too, have a story to tell. One of the most important responsibilities of an interfaith leader is to help others realize that they do have a story that is compelling and that needs to be told. By honing your own story as an interfaith leader, you can help others to understand and frame their stories too.

## CATALYZE MOVEMENTS

Some stories are so inspirational that they motivate large groups of individuals to action and catalyze movements. On the next page you’ll read the story of Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights activist and “Mother of the Modern Day Civil Rights Movement.” Hers is one example of how stories can catalyze movements. We talk more about the idea that stories can catalyze movements in Chapter 6, “Telling the World.”

Under Jim Crow laws—state and local laws enacted in Southern states of the U.S.—black and white citizens were segregated in virtually every aspect of daily life. On public buses, African Americans were required to forfeit their seats to white citizens if asked. Although many black citizens previously had stood up to this injustice—including athletic star Jackie Robinson—national attention was not brought to the situation until Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1, 1955. At the time, civil rights leaders and organizations had been planning to stage a protest of the segregation of public transportation, but they realized that they needed the right story to effectively catalyze the movement. Through her act of non-violent civil disobedience, Rosa Parks, a soft-spoken and well respected member of the community, provided that story. The civil rights community immediately convened to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the largest and most successful movements against racial segregation in U.S. history. During the 381 day boycott, some black citizens of Montgomery rode in carpools or traveled in black-operated cabs, but the majority of the 40,000 black commuters walked, some as far as 20 miles. Dozens of public buses stood idle for months, severely damaging the bus transit company's finances, until the law requiring segregation on public buses was lifted.



Rosa Parks

After her arrest, Parks became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement. She traveled and spoke extensively, ultimately receiving the Congressional Gold Medal for her work. Her medal bears the legend "Mother of the Modern Day Civil Rights Movement." Through her role in sparking the boycott, Rosa Parks also played an important part in internationalizing awareness of the plight of African Americans and the Civil Rights Movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott inspired the bus boycott in the township of Alexandria, Eastern Cape of South Africa, which was a key event in the mobilization of the national black majority under the leadership of the African National Congress. In 1990, she was invited to be part of the group that welcomed Nelson Mandela after his release from prison in South Africa. Upon spotting her in the reception line, Mandela called out her name and, hugging her, said, "You sustained me while I was in prison all those years."

## SHAPE IDENTITY

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur once asked the question: When you look at a picture of yourself as a baby and then you look at yourself in the mirror, how do you account for the fact that two beings who look so different are really the same person? Ricoeur's answer was story. By stringing together a narrative—by telling a set of stories—you are able to connect the baby in the picture to the person in the mirror.

Just as stories connect us to our past, they also play an important role in guiding both our current actions and shaping our identity in the future. The Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas argues that stories are a central part of personal identity, and specifically religious identity: "Stories are not substitute explanations we can someday hope to supplant with more straightforward accounts. Precisely to the contrary, narratives are necessary to our understanding of those aspects of our existence which admit no further explanation—i.e., God, the world, and the self" (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, 26). According to Dan P. McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University, "We find that ... narratives guide behavior in every moment, and

frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future" (Benedict Carrey, "This Is Your Life (and How You Tell It)," *New York Times*, Health Section, Online Edition, May 22, 2007). In other words, our brains seem to be naturally hardwired to think about ourselves and our identity through stories.

Okay, but why is identity so important? Identity is important because religious pluralism is all about the interaction of multiple identities, respecting the diversity of others' identities, and forming relationships across them. Perhaps more importantly, though, to be a pluralist is itself an identity that you must actively choose, certainly not in place of your own religious or philosophical identity, but alongside it. Thus, because religious pluralism is about identity and identity is all about stories, knowing and being able to tell stories of religious pluralism is crucially important to being a good interfaith leader.

The following story from the life of the Hindu peace activist, Mohandas Gandhi, is an excellent example of how listening to and telling stories helps shape how a person understands his/her own identity. For Gandhi, listening to stories of discrimination and humiliation helped shape his identity as a peace activist committed to fighting bigotry.

In 1893, Gandhi was working in South Africa as a lawyer. One evening, he was traveling first class on a train when a passenger on the train asked him to move to the third class car which was designated for people of color. Gandhi refused and produced his first class ticket. The railway officials and the local constable put him off the train and confiscated his coat and his suitcases despite the harsh winter conditions.

When his employer heard of the incident, he sent his Indian contacts in the area to comfort Gandhi and keep him safe. His employer's friends came to the railway station and, while there, they told Gandhi the stories of their hardships being Indian and living in South Africa. He spent the entire day listening to stories of discrimination, humiliation, and violence toward Indians. As he boarded his train that night, he resolved to work to root out the disease of discrimination in South Africa.

Yogesh Chadha, *Gandhi: A Life*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 1998, 53



Mohandas Gandhi

## STORIES AS ACTION

Look at the words in bold at the beginning of each section on the previous pages: **frame**, **empower**, **enable**, **inspire**, **catalyze**, and **shape**.

What do these words have in common? They all convey a sense of action. Stories are not static or passive modes of communication. Rather, they are powerful tools for motivating action.

## A PERSONAL STORY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

There are many different kinds of stories that you will learn to tell as you continue to lead interfaith work: stories of Faith Heroes who transformed their societies through their dedication to religious pluralism, stories of young people in the interfaith youth movement who are doing the same today, and religious stories that point to key components of religious pluralism.

In this section, we will focus on honing one particular type of story: your story. Or, to be more specific, a **personal story of religious pluralism**.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW A PERSONAL STORY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

Let us take a step back for a moment before we tackle the bigger question of crafting a personal story of religious pluralism. First, let us think about why you have the Interfaith Leader's Toolkit in your hands right now. Did you hear a compelling story about a Faith Hero and his/her work for pluralism? Did you hear an inspiring story of someone who is trying to continue that work today? Did one of your friends ask you to participate in an interfaith service-learning project and you want to learn more about it? Did you hear someone give a speech or an interview about the work of the interfaith youth movement that inspired you to join the movement yourself? Did you just happen upon an interfaith website and were curious to learn more about what you can do to participate in the movement?

### Personal Story of Religious Pluralism

A personal story of religious pluralism is a story from your own experience that illustrates why you care about religious pluralism. You may have many different moments—even disparate moments, or moments when you failed to act for religious pluralism—that inform why you are an interfaith leader today. What makes it a personal story of religious pluralism is that it uses narrative to convey a sense of why being an interfaith leader is important to who you are today.

Regardless of how you came to this particular moment, chances are you heard, read, or saw something that caught your interest and inspired you to delve further and discover what action you could take to be a part of this movement. The first steps in this process are to reflect on and identify why you were inspired to act, to weave that inspiration into a story that is compelling, and to tell that story to others in order to inspire them to join you in action as well. Knowing your own story, telling it well, and using it to inspire and elicit others' stories are among the most important skills for interfaith leadership.

## CRAFTING A PERSONAL STORY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

A good personal story of religious pluralism does not recount every event in your life leading up to this moment. Rather, it focuses on one or more experiences from your life that illustrates why you now care about religious pluralism and want to become an interfaith leader. So how do you know if a given experience is illustrative of why you care about religious pluralism or not? Remember that part of becoming an interfaith leader involves assuming the identity of a “pluralist” and that stories in general are all about identity. Thus, what you are looking for are experiences from your life that influenced how you understood your identity and your relationship with those of different backgrounds/identities.

Many of us, however, have multiple experiences like these in our lives and it may still be difficult to discern which are relevant to our desire to work for pluralism. Since this is a story about *religious* pluralism, the experiences that pertain to the development of your religious or philosophical perspective toward religious diversity are often the most relevant. For many (though not all) of us, these experiences follow a similar, general pattern:

- **Where You Started:** What religious identity or philosophical perspective did you grow up with? How did you understand that identity/perspective? Were you aware of or did you know people of different identities? What was your attitude or relationship to them like?
- **Conflict or Tension:** Experiences of conflict or tension normally arise from events unfolding in an unplanned or unexpected way. Sometimes, this occurs in a fashion that creates actual conflict or tension between yourself and others around you, but sometimes the events merely provoke internal conflict or tension, which is often no less profound. Again, since this is a story about religious pluralism, try to think of experiences that involved conflict or tension around religious lines. Perhaps this occurred when what you had believed about people of different backgrounds did not align with what you were experiencing in interacting with them for the first time.
- **“Aha” Moment or Experience:** This describes the experience of realizing that your perspective on religious diversity had changed or morphed in some way. This often stems from someone or something inspiring you to believe that the framework of religious pluralism can address and resolve the tension you had been experiencing.
- **Resolution:** This describes how you resolved the conflict or tension you were experiencing, often by applying the framework of religious pluralism to your situation.
- **Action:** This part of your story describes what you have done since this experience happened to you because this experience happened. What happened next? How did it change how you understood yourself and how you interacted with the world?





To help you to weave together and craft a personal story of religious pluralism, take a moment to answer the following questions. Included are frames, or storyboards, if you would prefer to sketch out or map out words instead of write them on lines. If you are in a group, a good activity is to take large pieces of paper and have the group sketch/write out their stories and share them with each other.

Using the above outline, list some experiences that illustrate why you are committed to religious pluralism. If this seems to be a bit too big of an idea, try listing the experiences that made you interested in organizing an interfaith project or simply to pick up and read this Toolkit. If you have more than three experiences, circle the top three experiences that had the most influence on your commitment to religious pluralism. ▼

What were specific details (names, places, conversations, relationships formed, experiences you shared) that stood out for you in the experiences you circled? What were the emotions you experienced at these specific times? ▼

Details are what make a story come to life for your listener. Details cut both ways, though, because irrelevant or gratuitous details can also kill a story through lengthiness. You want to create a vivid picture in your head of your experiences so that you can relate them compellingly. When it comes to actually telling the story, however, err on the side of keeping it short.

Is there anything particularly funny about any of the experiences you are relating? Humorous anecdotes can be a good way of connecting to your listeners (do not force it, though!). ▼

Who were/are the people involved in these experiences? ▼

What was the “aha” moment in your story that convinced you to care about religious pluralism? If you are having trouble thinking of one, go back to the experiences you identified earlier and see what insights you have written there. ▼

Are there any changes that you notice in yourself, or in how you see religious diversity, from the beginning of your story to the present time? If yes, what are they? Why do you think you changed? If no, why do you think you did not change? ▼

Can you pull out any common themes in your experiences that tie the beginning of your story to where you are now or to the work you do for religious pluralism today? E.g., did all the experiences involve experiences of diversity? Close personal relationships? Service work? ▼

Can you think of any stories from your religious or philosophical perspective that have similar themes to your personal story of religious pluralism? What are they? How do your story and the story from your religious or philosophical perspective relate to one another? ▼

Now that you have taken the time to think over these questions, try linking the answers together to form a narrative. Share your story with a friend and have them help you tighten your content and delivery. If you are working with this Toolkit in a group, exchange your stories with one another. This exercise will help you tighten your story and develop your listening skills as the group goes around telling and listening to each other’s stories.

# LISTENING

We have discussed the power of telling stories and the impact we hope it has on the listener, but it is crucially important to remember that a large part of being a good interfaith leader is being able to listen carefully to others as well.


Storytelling is not just about sharing your own story repeatedly; it is about an exchange of stories between people. So it is your job to do a lot of listening too!

Listening is a critical skill that can all too often be taken for granted. There are many techniques designed to enhance our ability to listen effectively. We are unlikely to employ them, however, unless

we recognize how complicated listening is and understand that flawed assumptions are often based on inaccurate or incomplete interpretations of what other people say. We most often assume that what we think we heard is what was said, though frequently this is not the case. People communicate not only information, but emotion and intent too, and we must actively listen for these as well.

In particular, good interfaith leaders are able to listen to other people's stories and help them to see the connections that exist between them. We talk much more about the importance and nature of listening in interfaith work in Chapter 3, "Facilitating Relationships."





## HOW DOES THIS CHAPTER CONNECT TO THE BIG PICTURE?

Why do we begin with stories? Because they inspire and even transform individuals, facilitate relationship-building, and are powerful catalysts for action.

Keep these aspects in mind when reading the other chapters. You will find that stories and storytelling weave their way through this entire Toolkit because they are such powerful and essential elements in effectively building religious pluralism.

To recap, this chapter focused on why it is so important to begin your interfaith work with stories. We looked at the different ways in which storytelling can be powerful and transformational. You have taken the time to think deeply about your own story and have begun to think about how it relates to stories from your religious or philosophical perspective. Lastly, we discussed how important it is for an interfaith leader to be a good listener too. In Chapter 2, "Inspiring and Recruiting Others," we discuss concretely how to use storytelling to inspire others toward action. We also introduced the idea that storytelling enables a mutually appreciative encounter in interfaith dialogue, which we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3, "Facilitating Relationships." Storytelling is also central to the media, publicity, and movement-building work that you want to read about in Chapter 6, "Telling the World."

