

One New Book for the Preacher

Emory Ann Gillespie

First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Vernon, Iowa

SURVIVAL STORIES: MEMOIRS OF CRISIS edited by Kathryn Rhett. Doubleday: New York, 1997.

When Kathryn Rhett's first child, a girl, was born, she was sick. She was full-term, but there were delivery complications, and her respiratory system shut down. Although a group of skilled physicians and nurses was able to bring her baby through the trauma, and she did recover finally, Kathryn, the mother, remained dazed. Even two years later, when her daughter was a healthy toddler, Kathryn seemed to be still in the midst of the crisis. She began to wander into bookstores, searching for memoirs about times of suffering. "My reading desires were not restricted by subject," she says. "I wanted to read about people at jarring moments in their lives."

Kathryn remembers the day she found William Loizeaux's *Anna: A Daughter's Life*, which chronicles the birth, illness, and death of a baby:

How I might have clutched it to my chest in gratitude if I were prone to such gestures, and how I tried to read it slowly and quickly at once....The memoirs I could lay my hands on articulated thoughts that were massed like senseless clouds in my head, and they made me feel - what is the opposite of alone? - befriended.

When I read Kathryn Rhett's introduction to *Survival Stories*, I made a mental leap to the church, picturing dazed women and men wandering into sanctuaries much the same way that Kathryn wandered into bookstores, stunned and isolated by crisis, hoping to be befriended by a story that is real, that does not end in a tidy bundle, but rumbles along in the same complexity and irresolution, the same sound and fury that they are experiencing at that moment. A compelling crisis memoir, according to Rhett:

transforms what happened into language to create an account that approaches wholeness. The crisis memoir reflects the truth that there is no ending, while simultaneously presenting a crafted story that allows both writer and reader to feel a sense of resolution.

As I read her words, it raised the question, can a story of crisis do the same in the context of a sermon? Can the preacher hold out the story of a person's struggles in all its messiness, while simultaneously giving the congregation a sense of resolution rising out of the sermon's form? If from within the story there springs what Southern novelist Lee Smith calls "news of the spirit," a message, a word, a voice that resounds deep within the listener's bones, then I believe that an unresolved story can work well in a sermon. (And frankly, when I listen to a sermon illustration, as soon as I suspect a predictable ending coming, I stop believing and start doodling on the offering envelopes.)

What follows Rhett's introduction is a collection of the stories she found during

her pain-driven wanderings, portraits of the human condition so particular, peculiar, and at times, bizarre, that they place bones and skin on the figure of Job, incarnating once again the sore-riddled sufferer whose relief does not hinge on a personal confession of sin.

In Don J. Snyder's piece, *Winter Work, Diary of a Day Laborer*, he shows us what it's like to be an unemployed English teacher trying to keep his family afloat. What it's like to stand in line at the unemployment office, pretending to read a book. What it's like to be the weak link at a construction site, no tools, no hard boots, no skills:

I knew I was the \$15-an-hour trash man...and though I was just as cold as anyone else and my clothes were just as dirty, when I came into the locker room for coffee break, I didn't feel like I'd earned it.

He writes of what it's like to go to the grocery store, pick out things for his seven-year-old daughter's birthday dinner, then, when he pulls out the food stamps to pay for it, hearing a man behind him groan; what it's like to receive three more rejection letters from colleges to which he's applied for teaching positions, and finally, what it's like to meet with the unexpected kindness of Cal, a seventy-three-year-old veteran contractor:

The next day when I got to work Cal was standing there holding a paper bag.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"Digging ditches," I said.

"You'll be strong by spring," he said, handing me the bag. It was a beautiful pair of work boots. Leather with felt liners.

"I can't take them," I said.

"You have to," he said.

While the theme of unwarranted grace undergirds the narrative, this story is also held together by the theme of community. Over the course of a cold year in Maine, the contractors literally build a house around Don, although, as an individual, he is unable to read the blueprints, envision the goal or understand his small part in the giant hum of the hive:

I kept looking for the narrative in my work, something that was moving forward and would add up to a house. Instead, I worked for hours cutting boards I didn't nail into place and stacking lumber in piles that vanished by the end of the day. I was so far out of the logic of the operation that I didn't realize we were actually building two houses.

Then, in the last few pages, we read the following:

Overnight the storm passed, and I was the first one at work in the morning (when the house was completed). The living room - a ninety-six-foot long great hall with three Rumford fireplaces, wide triple windows, and seventeen doors, each eight feet tall, with twelve one-foot-square panes of glass - was drenched in sunlight.

And finally, we get the beautiful twist, the parable that preachers seek in a good pulpit story:

Larry, (the foreman) came up behind me. “It’s amazing,” he said. “Someone draws a picture of a place, and then suddenly there it is, exactly like the picture.” He had lived with this place for almost a year, always unwhole, broken into small pieces.

Don Snyder is moved by the foreman’s faith, not so much because the foreman was able to create a complete house, but because for most of his life as a contractor, he was willing to stand and work and live in the midst of the pieces. As they say in my native South Carolina, that dog will hunt. (Translation: That story will preach.)

Natalie Kusz’s *Vital Signs* tells how she lived in Alaska as a young girl. Once she got off the school bus on a winter evening, found her house dark and empty, so she walked to a neighbor’s house and was attacked by one of their huskies, leaving her nearly dead. Natalie writes of her mother’s painful recollection of that night, how she made an error in timing, got to the house moments after the daughter arrived home, searched, found and rushed her daughter to the hospital. Then, how she thought of Job, “who also had lived in a spacious golden land (like Alaska), who had prospered in that place, yet had cried in the end.” I told this story in one of my sermons to explore the landscape of guilt, and the silence of the church told me that Kusz’s story was the news of the spirit those people stumbled through the doors that morning to hear.

In Rhett’s collection of sufferings, triumphs, and ongoing struggles, you will probably recognize some authors and titles; Jamaica Kincaid and an excerpt from *A Small Place* (works well alongside a prophetic text), Lucy Grealy’s essay “Mirrorings” about living with the false promises of facial surgery, and Reynolds Price’s piece from *A Whole New Life*. But other authors also present stories that work equally well as a companion to Job, and also with some of the Lenten passages for year C. Can you imagine preaching on the Philippian passage for Lent 5, *What I thought was gain is lost*, by telling about Lauren Slater’s rise on Prozac, then fall? Do you dare?

Can you imagine preaching on the Prodigal Son text for Lent 4, *I am no longer worthy to be called your son*, and telling Nancy Mairs’ story, “Here, Grace.” Mairs, after committing adultery, declares her own credo of self-loathing, saying, “I just don’t know how to feel much affection for someone I feel sorry for, for being married to me.” Someone on the back row of the sanctuary may be waiting to hear this.

Although a few of the book’s stories attempt a theodicy that rings hollow, many authors make biblical or theological leaps that strike a bold tone in a contemporary setting. But most of the writers, when speaking of their experiences, achieve a voice that is compelling and beautiful. In her introduction to *Survival Stories*, Kathryn Rhett writes these words:

Reynolds Price comments in his memoirs about spinal cancer that after his first radiation treatments, he searched for books that would serve as “companions more than prayers or potions that had worked for another.” He was hardly alone in his desire for books as company. As a writer, he was asked by people to add his recollections of illness “to the very slim row of sane printed matter which comes from the far side of catastrophe.” I hope

this anthology will also be a worthy addition to the shelf.

This grateful preacher responds by saying, “T’is. “ *Survival Stories* is for the preacher poet, the one who is not afraid to stand in a pulpit and hold out stories that do not depend upon the success motif. To the person in the pew, sometimes it’s enough to say, “Here’s what it’s like to be newly divorced, to be scared, to live with mental illness.” The fact that these stories are told in church at all, where Christ’s etched body shines in the stained glass and cool water shimmers in the font, can be redemption enough.