

Reflective piece

We are Appalachian Christians: Wait, can we say that?

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Abstract

Considering the question: 'can we say that we're Southern Appalachian Christians in the world of academia?', the authors examine the answer amid diverse people groups while reflecting on their personal cultures as Appalachian women, Appalachian storytellers, and, yes, Appalachian Christians. Acknowledging that cultural influences impact their lives in academia, they explore how faith is often perceived in higher education. Living in the Southern United States, in the heart of Appalachia, in an area readily identified as the Bible-Belt, the authors use storytelling as a vehicle for examining intolerance as well as for thinking about what it means to be tolerant. Framed within a diversity and equity model of thinking, they provide a thought-provoking probe: have we entered a world where religious intolerance, specifically that of Christian beliefs, is acceptable?

Introduction

We grew up in an area rich in stories; listening to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others spin tales that were sometimes true, sometimes not. The tales, regardless if they were funny or sad, always moved us. They provided a way for us to connect to the people and the world in which we lived. We travelled back in time, re-living events or living them for the first time, through the words of the storytellers. Time-traveling, however, was not just delegated to the past. We were given glimpses into our futures, seeing what we might become on the stages built by the spinners of yarns. The worlds we visited went beyond the physical. We met spirits disguised as ghosts or angels. We got to know God and Satan, good and evil wrapped up in messages of love as well as hell, fire, and damnation. These stories shaped who we were and were to become. They acted as a lens for cultural explorations, while painting a picture of a rich, diverse world. And, regardless of the time or place the stories took us, they all shared a common ground. They scared us, enamored us, thrilled us; invoked happiness, sadness, or indifference. These tales, in essence, made us feel.

Building on our personal cultural experiences, we saw no reason why we could not implement the art of storytelling into the university courses and workshops we teach. Much like Buffo (2015:2) we love stories and feel that a “well-told narrative can catch [students’] attention and can set the mood for learning. As Christians, we readily acknowledge that our relationship with God influences everything we do. For us to hide this critical part of our life as educators, in a nation that strongly supports the separation of church and state, has always seemed as if we are somehow being disloyal to our Savior. So, with a leap of faith, we decided to tell our stories and talk openly about our love for God. Putting this into action, however, was not without challenges and deep soul-searching. Initially, we were invited to give a presentation at a function at our university which challenged us to share something that would “foster a culture of teaching and learning that is engaged, innovative, transformative, and purposeful” (Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning, 2020:1). Because of our success with using stories to engage students, we knew they had the power to transform instruction. Students, as Buffo points out, become interested in not only what the story is about but also how it relates to them (2015). As such, storytelling in this realm seemed like a perfect fit. Excited to tell stories rich in our personal Southern cultures, we had a bit of trepidation. In light of contestation of knowledge, we were unsure of how our stories would be perceived in the world of academia. Would they be met with skepticism? Disdain? Indifference? Or, perhaps, they would be accepted and valued for what they were: a reflection of our cultural influences, of who we are as Appalachian Christians, with stories to tell of our fierce love for God, land, home, community, and good fried chicken.

The literature suggests that storytelling is a powerful avenue in which to foster an appreciation and understanding for culture (Carter-Black, 2007; Short, 2012; Aidman & Long, 2017). Somehow, as a society, we have thumbed our nose at sharing personal stories, opting for what some may argue is, if not cerebral, at least a more streamlined approach to communication. In a world where the norm encompasses technologically supported dialogue with people around the globe, it seems ironic that personal and cultural understandings may be underdeveloped or lacking. While the task of rectifying a concern of such magnitude is daunting, it is not insurmountable. Armed with these beliefs, we wondered how our colleagues would react to the stories we told, specifically, to use the cultural lexicon, our testimony of faith. At this point, we understood the concept of a colliding narrative (Lang, 2017) as we considered how to reconcile a religious, Appalachian background with our academic lives.

Would what we shared, our personal histories and cultures, be viewed as crossing the separation of church and state mandate?

Need for Personal Stories (What the Literature Says)

Lockett and Jones (2009:177) suggest that “Though stories are told today more often for entertainment and amusement, the art of storytelling remains of significant value to society”. Such a sentiment is not new. For instance, Robert Cole (1989) in his well-known work, *The Call of Stories*, advocates that the sharing of stories is the only way to truly understand another person. The Native American proverb, “Don't judge any man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins,” also suggests that understanding is the result of shared experiences. More pointedly, Kenyon and Randall (1997:1) find that “to be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to *be* a story.

Perhaps, more so than any other related endeavor, the sharing of personal stories allows the teller and receiver to explore not only their own beliefs, but also that of others. According to Pajares (1992:138), our belief systems are paramount to our individual identities in that they “provide elements of structure, order, direction, and shared values.” In light of the implication that beliefs about ourselves and others may be entrenched before adulthood and become increasingly difficult to change, the exchanging of personal stories takes on an important dimension in that, through storytelling, people may share their beliefs, though embedded in stories, which they may otherwise be reluctant to discuss. Thus, ramifications of sharing personal stories are multi-faceted and “...provide a way for us to move between local and global cultures and to explore the ways in which people live and think in cultures that differ from their own” (Short, 2012:9). Simply stated, storytelling allows for conversation on personal and/or cultural topics that may otherwise not be easily accessible.

While coming to similar conclusions in another research endeavor, Taylor (2013) further determined that individuals were often more inclined to reflect on their own personal stories when first considering the personal stories of others. After listening to and considering how others' past experiences influenced or determined their life courses, they made parallel comparisons on how their personal beliefs, consciously or subconsciously, influenced their own life choices. For some, these discoveries were truly ground-breaking and allowed them to consider perspectives and/or beliefs they had previously not considered or had left unexamined. In other words, storytelling can provide an excellent springboard for both interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection. Based on these findings, a strong argument can be made that the sharing of personal narratives is a serious contender in addressing a diverse world where empathy and understanding for others are needed. Beyond this, “cognitive research and classroom evidence consistently support storytelling and the use of narrative as a valid teaching and learning strategy improving engagement, critical thinking and concept retention” (Abernathy, 2018:7). In consideration of the question, what makes an excellent professor, Herman (2011) states that listening and respecting students leads to understanding them; storytelling provides a perfect platform for accomplishing this. From a teaching prospective, professors lead by example, sharing their stories, creating a personal connection with students.

What Happened

It was a dark and dreary day (we think, or, perhaps it could just be in retrospect that it seems like it should have been a dark and dreary day). Excited and a bit anxious we arrived early to set up the room for the workshop participants, said a quick prayer for ourselves and the presentation, optimistic that our audience would be receptive to what we planned on sharing. If we are totally honest, we were also a bit nervous. As colleagues arrived, the old adage that no prophet is accepted in his own home country kept running through our heads (Luke 4:24, KJV); as well as the United States' stance on the separation of church and state. This separation dates to the presidency of Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800s, where the influence of the government on religion was to be null and void with religious freedom a right of American citizens. This has since morphed into the government-set boundaries for faith-based practices in government funded entities, including schools. We knew the fine line we were walking, but assumed the Southern Appalachian cultural characteristic of faith was a strong support for addressing ours.

As a way of introduction, we shared our stories in a poem for two voices. (See Figure 1. *Ponderings on Our Roots*). Next, we provided a rationale for storytelling in higher education, highlighting its relationship to culture, diversity, and its ability to connect all of us. Specifically, we wanted to share our stance that "No doubt about it, the best speakers are good storytellers. The best writers are good storytellers. The best leaders are good storytellers. The best teachers and trainers and coaches are good storytellers" (Duncan, 2014:1). We followed the rationale with stories from each of us, giving more insight into our personal culture and backgrounds, showcasing our diversity as Appalachian Christians in academia.

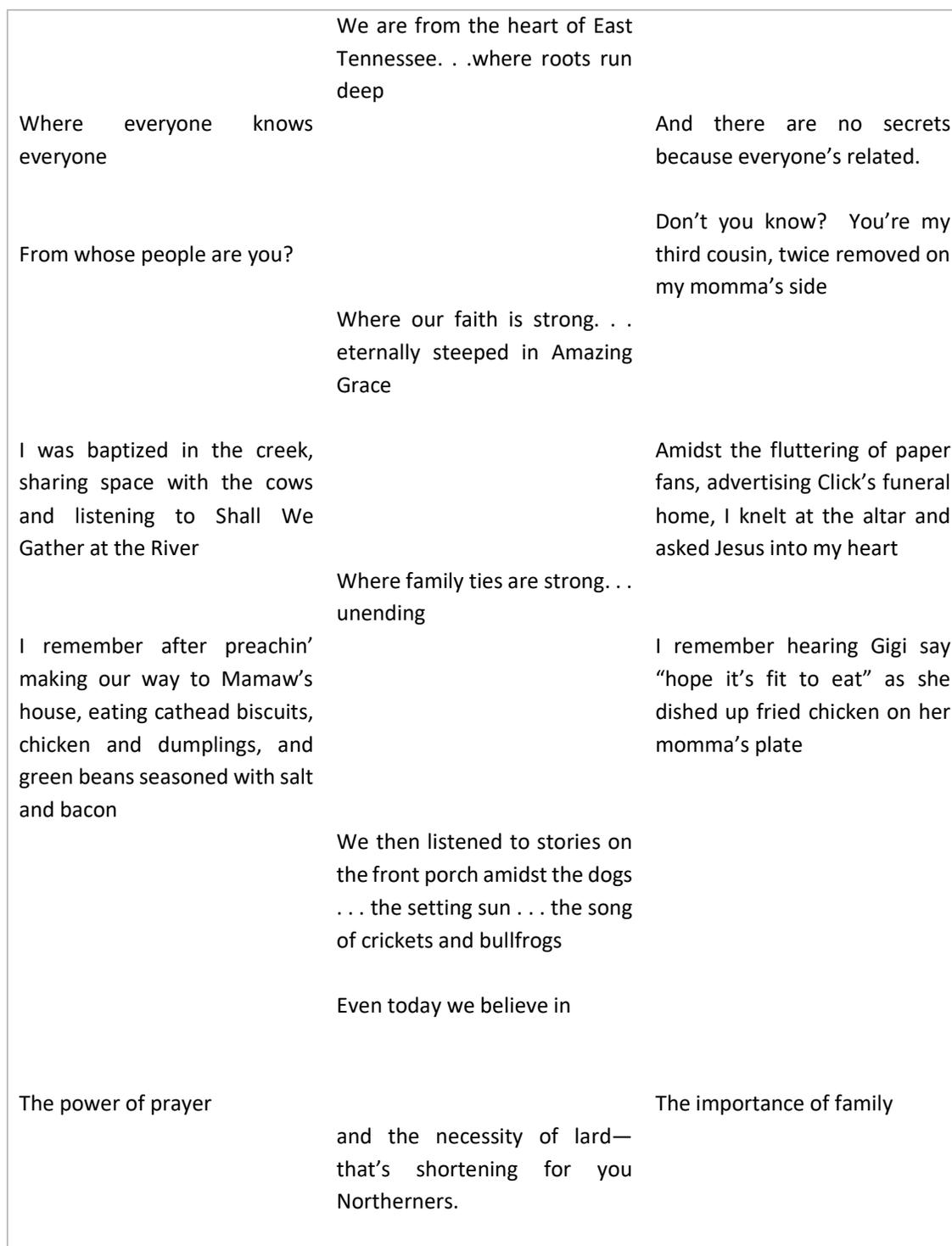


Figure 1: Ponderings on Our Roots (Source: Authors).

Rather, in full disclosure, we became uneasy from the very beginning. One individual, someone we didn't know, but who worked at our university, entered the room with a frown and an angry tone of voice. From the onset, it seemed as if she was determined to show her displeasure with what we were doing. She was dismissive of everything, especially of our declaration of faith, questioning not just how

we could use the stories within our courses but why we would want to. In her loudly stated opinion, our stories held no value whatsoever because neither she nor her students could relate. We explained that these were only our stories and that, in order to establish an all-inclusive environment for our students, we were modeling, if you will, the sharing of personal culture that included our faith. We were, to use an Appalachian saying, 'practicing what we preach' because we want our students to feel comfortable sharing about their own lives while fostering an appreciation for others, celebrating differences and recognizing commonalities. As the workshop continued, unfortunately, it seemed as if the other participants lost their voices, looking at the table, choosing not to speak as their peer's voice became increasingly loud and argumentative.

Feeling as if we had been twisted and hung out to dry (to use good Appalachian vernacular), we were more than ready to engage the audience in an interactive writing exercise. We hoped participants would have moments of enlightenment, discovering unexpected similarities and enjoying their differences. As presenters, we were also desperate for a few moments of quiet reflection in order to regroup, not from opposing ideas, but from the anger and negativity from which they were presented. Previously, within the courses we teach, we had experienced success in getting others to share their personal culture, backgrounds, and stories by using noted poet and author George Ella Lyon's (1999) 'I'm From' approach. From there, while culture and backgrounds may have been very different, common themes arose – particularly the importance of family and/or relationships with others whether the participants lacked them or had them in abundance. So, with 'Let's get this going so we can get out of here' and 'bless her heart' running through our heads (or maybe whispered to each other if we are totally honest), we powered on thinking that engagement would be the answer.

At this point, we wish we could say that we won her over. But, as we learned in Sunday School, lying gets you nowhere. She refused to engage, insisting that she had nothing in common with anyone. Even when other workshop participants shared their *Where I'm From* stories and how they connected with each other, she shrugged at their replies and stayed on her island, further insisting that she couldn't relate to the content of anyone's poem. We continued to smile, encouraged everyone to share, and spoke from our experiences of working with students in both undergraduate and graduate classes on how using personal stories could help to establish a classroom environment where everyone is respected, and their opinions are tolerated if not appreciated. Signaling that the session was over, we thanked everyone for joining us, gathered our supplies, and walked toward the exit. The one participant who refused to engage persisted in haranguing us. Persevering, we continued to silently pray for wisdom and patience, but our prayers quickly turned to that of a different kind. We prayed to escape through whatever means necessary; pleading with God to make it happen. He did not, however, take us out of the confrontational situation. Instead, He saw fit to take us through it. Looking back, we know that He was with us. Perhaps, she thought with just the three of us present, she would convince us that our personal stories were unrelatable, useless, and insignificant or, maybe, she just wanted to see what would happen if we were provoked in private. If so, she must have been displeased, or at least surprised, that we maintained our dignity and our quiet assurance of faith.

Flash-forward a couple of months. We were slated to present in Savannah, Georgia at a conference that embraced diversity, global perspectives, and social justice. However, because we were still licking our wounds from the previous attack, we discussed how to approach the presentation in a way that would eliminate such a negative response from our peers in academia. We talked about rewriting our

poem, leaving out all mention of religion and making it less 'Appalachian'. We contemplated how we would fix the stories so that religion was not mentioned, and the word 'Appalachia' removed. As we discussed our upcoming presentation, the joy quickly evaporated as the overall feeling of what we wanted to share became devoid of emotion or feeling because we weren't staying true to ourselves. While Appalachians are not considered indigenous, we do identify as people with fractured identities which occurs when parts of who we are conflict with each other (i.e. Southern Appalachian Christians *in academia*). Additionally, we suffer from contestation about knowledges (belief in a higher power makes us less knowledgeable) and experience a colliding narrative when we attempt to reconcile a religious/Appalachian narrative with that of professors in a government funded and run university (considering the separation of church and state). By making the presentation less Appalachian, less Southern, we, in essence, were fracturing our own identities.

One of the primary purposes of the presentation was to show how we use storytelling to encourage students to embrace social justice, but in silencing our voices as Appalachian Christians, we were modeling the opposite, willing to marginalize our own diverse culture. In response to criticism, we were attempting to remake ourselves into something that we thought society might be more willing to accept. We were only going to let people see what we thought they wanted to see, inadvertently participating in social oppression. Thankfully, through reflection and prayer, we came to our senses because we did not want to model for our students that they need to cull the parts of themselves that society might find unacceptable. We needed to be true to ourselves, and as Appalachian Christians this meant owning all aspects of our diverse culture, including our faith. Feeling strongly that God was preparing an opportunity for us to use storytelling as a way to share our faith, we prepared to present to an audience in which we were the minority.

Prepared and prayed-up, we were early to the workshop, ready to set everything up for our presentation. Although technology was challenging, it isn't the first thing that we remember about that day. With a room of about 30 diverse participants, we introduced our topic and our purpose – to tell personal stories, and share how we can use them in our classrooms to help students appreciate their similarities as well as their differences. As audience members began asking questions, smiling and nodding, we glanced at each other, almost giddy with excitement. While we shared our personal stories, including those involving our faith, participants responded in kind, never challenging but only asking questions to secure understanding. Though hundreds of miles from our own university, we felt at home.

During an interactive writing time, we were amazed that attendees, without directives from us, pointed out how different they had thought they were from each other – while in reality they had many things in common – embracing the importance of family and/or relationships with others, the love of food and nature, and commonalities of religion or the lack thereof. With 100 percent participation, lots of laughter, and thoughtful questions, it was truly a memorable workshop for us. While we cannot say with a definitive answer why this particular workshop was successful, we do attribute the success to the time spent in reflection and prayer, seeking God's guidance, and the connections participants made with each other (and us) through storytelling. When we announced the closing of the session, it was almost as if they had not heard us. Many stayed behind, asking us questions and talking with each other about subjects generated by the *Where I'm From* poems. One attendee even approached us and extended an invitation to Florida to present at a university where

the faculty and student body were very open and committed to finding ways to help foster appreciation for others, embracing differences and recognizing commonalities while promoting social justice.

We continue to celebrate this invitation as response to our prayers and as an answer to the question, 'Can we say that we're Appalachian Christians in the world of academia?' In the larger context, amid diverse people groups, we found acceptance of who we are as Appalachian women, Appalachian storytellers, and, yes, Appalachian Christians. This group, without any outward show of intolerance, recognized our cultural influences and acknowledged how faith has impacted our lives. Unfortunately, we did not enjoy the same acceptance in our own homeland, so to speak. Still, it made us wonder then and question now, have we entered a world where religious intolerance, specifically that of Christian beliefs, is acceptable? Many of us in higher education encourage tolerance and recognize that the beauty of the world lies, in part, in our differences. Recently, a graduate student reminded us of what tolerance actually means: "If someone tolerates something, that someone disagrees with that thing, yet doesn't interfere. Today, this definition has been twisted: to be tolerant today means that you must agree with that thing or your own person will become suspect" (Personal communication, October 27, 2019).

So, can we say that we're Appalachian Christians in the world of academia? While the surface answer is "yes," the complete, deeper answer lies within this verse; I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me (Philippians 4:13, KJV).

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