

Stories

with a Purpose

↳ *Lessons for the Spirit*

Lessons for the Heart ↳

Ronnie J. Muro and Rosanna P. Tsivourakis

*Stories
with a Purpose*

Stories with a Purpose

*Lessons for the Spirit,
Lessons for the Heart*

Ronnie J. Muro
Rosanna P. Tsivourakis



saint mary's press

The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the prepublication and production services departments of Saint Mary's Press.

Copyright © 2006 by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

3803

ISBN 978-0-88489-659-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Muro, Ronnie J.

Stories with a purpose : lessons for the spirit, lessons for the heart /
Ronnie J. Muro and Rosanna P. Tsivourakis.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-88489-659-3 (pbk.)

1. Storytelling in Christian education. 2. Christian education of young people. 3. Catholic Church—Education. I. Tsivourakis, Rosanna P. II. Title.

BX926.3.M87 2006

268'.6—dc21

2005018297

Dedications

To my parents, for their example; my family, for their love; and the young people in my community, for their inspiration.

—Ronnie Muro

To my parents, whose stories gave me my identity; to my brothers and sister, who live the stories with me; to Baki, Niko, Aleka, Pia, and Erica, my own beloved storytellers, in whom I delight.

—Rosanna Tsivourakis

Authors' Acknowledgments

Thank you to all who allowed me to share my stories and encouraged me to continue sharing them.

Thank you to my wife, Debbie, for her love, undying support, and endless patience.

Thank you to Chris, my son and best friend, for writing so many new chapters in my life; to Natalie, my precious daughter, for filling my heart with more love than I knew possible; and to Natalie's husband, Josh, for enriching our family story.

Thank you to my parents for their great example of love and family – Daddy, the greatest storyteller of all, and Mama, who still inspires me. I miss you both.

Thank you to all members, past and present, of Saint Patrick Catholic Church in Adamsville, Alabama, especially the young people of SPIRIT and the fellow adult leaders who lived the stories with me.

Thank you to Sr. Joan Harrington and Fr. Ray Murrin for giving me the opportunity to minister to young people.

Thank you to Laurie for showing confidence in me and for helping make a dream come true.

Thank you, God, for blessing me with my faith, my family, my church. Without you, I am nothing.

– Ronnie Muro

Thanks to Pia and Erica for not griping when I monopolized the family computer, and to my husband for his quiet smile of acknowledgment that, yeah, I could do this.

Thanks to family and friends who were interested enough to keep me on the ball; to G, who always said I should do this; to Renay, whose memory of my story was better than my own; and to Laurie Ann, ever the good friend, the encourager, the drill sergeant.

– Rosanna Tsivourakis

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Preface.</i> | 11 |
| <i>Foreword.</i> | 13 |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 15 |
| <i>Chapter 1</i> <i>Old Spice</i> | 21 |
| <i>Chapter 2</i> <i>Feeding the Hunger</i> | 29 |
| <i>Chapter 3</i> <i>Thanksgiving Touchdowns</i> | 35 |
| <i>Chapter 4</i> <i>The Search</i> | 41 |
| <i>Chapter 5</i> <i>Sight</i> | 49 |
| <i>Chapter 6</i> <i>Hanging Out on the Fringe.</i> | 57 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Chapter 7</i> | |
| <i>Mom Was Right</i> | 65 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 8</i> | |
| <i>The Stick</i> | 73 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 9</i> | |
| <i>The Hike</i> | 81 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 10</i> | |
| <i>Caller ID</i> | 87 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 11</i> | |
| <i>The Stick Lives On</i> | 95 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 12</i> | |
| <i>A Seat on the Bus</i> | 103 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 13</i> | |
| <i>The Orange Drink</i> | 109 |
| | |
| <i>Chapter 14</i> | |
| <i>A Miracle</i> | 117 |
| | |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 125 |

Preface

When I was a child, my dad told me stories of superheroes saving the world or animals that were able to talk to me only. Now as an adult, I hear stories of other people's childhood memories or the current news of the day. Most of the time, these stories are not as exciting as talking animals, but not much is.

My father has told and written thousands of stories throughout the years. The stories he has chosen to share in this book are not the same ones I heard as a child. These are true stories of his life, our life. At the time, I saw these events as simple everyday occurrences, as nothing exciting, and certainly not as lessons to be learned. After an event, my father would share with me his version of what had happened, allowing me to see it through his eyes. Through his storytelling, my dad managed to teach me valuable lessons at the most unexpected of times.

My father and Rosanna have adapted their stories into a format to help illustrate lessons. The lessons vary from topics like self-confidence to friendship. I encourage you to read these stories to the young people you lead, read the Bible passages associated with each, and invite the participants to reflect on how each story may relate to their life and how they can use what they have learned to make a difference.

Sharing a story with someone is a gift. The stories we tell and the stories we hear become a part of who we are: they link us to the past or propel us toward the future. The ability to truly listen to another's story allows each of us the wonderful opportunity to see life, ever so briefly, through someone else's eyes.

—Christopher J. Muro

Foreword

The theme of this book, the importance of storytelling, reminds me of an event in my youth that inspired me to be a teacher. I was fortunate enough to be placed in some advanced English classes while in high school. I say fortunate not for the accelerated curriculum but for the teacher, Ms. Dale Quin, who would instruct me for three years. She was a small, nearly weathered, gruff woman who, at all costs, did her best to conceal her tenderness. She succeeded. Most of us thought she was too hard, too insensitive, and too mean. Ah, the wonders of appearance versus reality! Her class was certainly structured, often overly demanding (for which I am thankful now), and required full participation. Grades fell swiftly for those who sat idle. She demanded our best efforts. She facilitated a dynamic classroom—a community—and slowly my classmates and I began to realize that a transformation was happening within us.

One day toward the end of my junior year, we entered class at the bell's beckoning. I noticed that Ms. Quin seemed different, distressed. The impetus for what followed remains a mystery to me. She pulled a chair out to roughly the center of the room—a small, humble chair that seemed the perfect accompaniment for what transpired. She sat. She began to speak. What poured forth was a moment of story sharing that changed the way we perceived her. This titan began to shrink; her humanity brought her down to us. A throne may have seemed more appropriate the day before, but this day the wooden chair suited her perfectly.

She was compelled, she said, to reveal certain aspects of her personal story that may or may not clarify certain aspects of her classroom persona. She told us, slowly, of her introversion as a child and of the sanctuary she found in stories and words. Following her own education, she felt called to re-enter the field, but from the opposite perspective. She wanted to share the richness of the word with others. And there was more.

She told of medical complications that prevented her from ever having children. As she told of her condition and how she learned to cope by “adopting” her students, each of us felt the sublimity of the moment. She told us that she had the good fortune of getting to know us, of having us in class for a few years, of forming relationships. She invested her energy in us because we were her children. In that very moment, the governance and administration of the classroom suddenly made sense to me. The moments of heightened anger or joy, of

extreme pressure or deep discussion happened as they would in a living room with one's family. I realized that Ms. Quin's behavior was justified because she loved us and thus expected of us that which she might have expected from her own children. I was overwhelmed. Needless to say, the remainder of our time with her was fruitful, energetic, often loud, and always healthy! This great mother of the classroom suddenly got the best from all her students.

It was the sharing, the willingness to shatter the arbitrary and necessary divisions, that lured us. In Ms. Quin's vulnerable moment, she appeared to us as monumentally strong. And the reciprocation, I think, validates the sharing. Her sharing was replete with virtues. Her time with us was laden with those best qualities of love that are described in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (vv. 4–6).

This brave woman, who was willing to lovingly share her story, compelled us to be better students.

Stories with a Purpose: Lessons for the Spirit, Lessons for the Heart offers a variety of personal stories, each uniquely replete with its own virtues. Each is a small instance of sharing, from the author to you and the young people you lead. The stories have a transformative power. They propagate all that is good and worth keeping and act as a catalyst for positive change. As was evidenced by Ms. Quin's honest sharing with us, there is an invaluable reciprocal value to telling a story.

—Niko Tsivourakis, graduate student of education,
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Introduction

The Power of Storytelling

We are all storytellers. Rarely can we get through a normal day without telling or hearing a story or two. By telling stories, we entertain and inform, but we also grow in self-understanding. Yet in this electronic age, the wonder and enjoyment of reading or listening to a good story is often lost to the lure of the Internet, interactive DVDs, video games, and cable television. It is difficult to compete with the glamour of media, whose activities are frequently solo endeavors, removing a young person from the company of peers and family. Media is mechanically driven, precluding the need for the viewer or listener to have an imagination or communication skills. Storytelling, on the other hand, fosters the ability and desire to use both the imagination and communication skills to build and support relationships. One would wonder, then, how media entertainment could compete with the more personal give-and-take of sharing stories with one another. . . .

Storytelling has become more difficult. Attention spans are shorter, more demanding, and more sophisticated. Perhaps it is the sharp contrast between sensory overload and the quiet enjoyment of simply listening that makes young people pay attention when stories are presented. In this way, storytelling is a unique teaching tool for illustrating lessons of moral value.

Most dictionaries define *story* as a narrative account of real or imagined events. We use stories to pass on accumulated wisdom, beliefs, and values. We explain how things are, why they are, and our role and purpose in life. Stories are the building blocks of knowledge, the foundation of memory and learning. Stories connect us with our humanness and link the past, the present, and the future by teaching us to anticipate the possible consequences of our actions.

Matters of faith also lend themselves to storytelling. Jesus knew the power of stories and often used parables as a way to connect with people and teach them. Carefully choosing images familiar to his audience, Jesus presented clear and simple examples to illustrate his lessons. The sower, the vineyard, and the mustard seed were familiar images to those who worked the land.

Jesus knew, as do all good storytellers, that stories stimulate listeners and open them up to a fuller experience of learning. Rather than merely hearing a

lesson dictated to them, when people listen to a story, they experience emotion, create visual images, and process the story's message on multiple levels. This leads to a deeper understanding of what the story is trying to convey. More than any other form of communication, storytelling is an essential part of the human experience.

How to Use This Book

An Overview

Our daily routine is filled with seemingly meaningless events, but when we are aware of God's hand, the events take on new meaning. Each story in this book delivers a message about living the Christian life. The settings, circumstances, and themes vary, but the fundamental message is that God is working in our lives today.

Telling the Story

As the storyteller, you will need to be well prepared in order to have success with your listeners. The most effective stories are those told by people who have obvious excitement and passion for their stories. That is the lure that captures the attention of the listeners and holds their interest. When you love the story, your listeners will respond.

Once you settle on a story, spend time with it. You may need to tell it a few times before you feel completely comfortable with it. Here are some tips for getting to know your story:

- Read the story several times, first for pleasure, then with concentration.
- Analyze the appeal of the story—the word pictures you want your listeners to see and the mood you wish to create.
- Live with your story until the characters and setting become as real to you as people and places you know.
- Visualize it! Imagine sounds, tastes, scents, colors. Only when you know the story sensually can you convey the images to your audience.
- Learn the story as a whole rather than in fragments. Master the structure of the story and then simplify it to a basic outline of scenes. Do not try to memorize it.
- Practice the story often—in front of the mirror, to your cat, while you're driving in the car, with friends, or with anyone who will listen. Even when

telling an old and familiar story, you must use imagination and skill to make it come alive.

As you relate the story, speak with confidence and emotion. Use your voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language to help deliver the story. Pause for emphasis when appropriate, and vary the pace of your telling. For instance, if you are speaking of a frantic time, speak rapidly to capture the emotion. Let your voice convey the emotion not only by your tone and inflection, but by your pace and rhythm. Facial expressions can add to the visualization of the story, but make sure they are natural and appropriate. Do not exaggerate them so much that they distract from the story.

Practice your delivery so that it becomes natural. Becoming totally familiar with the story will allow you to know the proper time to pause, speed up, alter your voice pattern, or use facial expressions. All these elements combine to make a story effective and interesting.

If you have not had time to become completely familiar with the story, you will need a copy in front of you. You may choose to read the whole story or just parts of it. Reading certain sections word for word will bring emphasis to those sections. You may decide to switch back and forth from paraphrasing the story and reading excerpts. Whatever your method, speak clearly, with emotion and purpose. Continue to engage your audience by maintaining as much eye contact as possible if you are reading.

Breaking Open the Story

Allowing time for the listeners to reflect on and discuss the story is a necessary part of storytelling. Therefore, each chapter includes a set of discussion and reflection questions, group activity ideas, and a prayer experience to help the participants take a deeper look at the message, moral, or purpose of the story and relate it to their own lives. You can use the discussion and reflection questions in large or small group settings, or you can offer them for individual reflection.

You can use the activities with the group to further process the story. The activities will help active learners see the lessons more clearly, as the participants will be able to “touch” and “feel” them by participating in some physical and mental processes. Some activities require preparation, so be sure you review them thoroughly ahead of time to determine which work best for you and your group.

An important part of the lesson is living the story—carrying out its message. Examples of how to live the message of each story are offered, and you may

choose to share those ideas with the group. Each suggestion calls the participants to action, inviting them to do something positive. A great story will do more than entertain; it will change its listeners. By taking an action based on the story's lesson, the participants are changed and, more important, so is the world.

The prayer experience that ends each chapter is geared to complete the communication of the story, the discussion and reflection, and the challenge to live the story. The stories show how God is present to us in our everyday lives and how God's lessons are often taught in the most mundane situations and ordinary times. Prayer is an invitation for the group to ask for God's guidance and companionship on this journey. Prayer also reminds us of our dependence on God and the hope that we continue to be mindful of God's presence in our daily lives.

A Final Note from the Authors

Storytelling works! We all have a desire to be connected with others. We do this best when we allow ourselves the freedom to be vulnerable to one another as we explore the experiences we share. These are *our* stories. Both of us have told them and retold them as a way of expressing emotion, sharing a lesson learned, or connecting with new friends. It is our hope that as you read them and prepare to use them, you will find as much value in them as we do.

But don't stop with these stories. Find your own voice to tell the stories that have shaped and influenced *your* life. Tell the stories that have stayed with you as you have grown and matured—the stories that are the red flags of your conscience, waving wildly whenever you need help making a decision or whenever you feel confused.

Tell the stories of your families. Begin now to record what you know of the members of your families, especially the elders and those who have passed on. Reflect on what you have learned from family members and how you can pass that wisdom on. Share these stories with the next generation so that they also may become a part of the stories.

Tell the stories of your friends. What have you learned in life from others around you? Childhood is filled with one adventure after another, but it is only after some reflection that we find the significance of some of these events. What friends, events, or situations in your life helped shape the person you have become? Share those lessons with others.

Tell the stories of your faith. How have you struggled along your journey? Who or what helped you along the way to keep the faith? Share what you

learned from your struggles and your successes to help show the way for others. Often the simplest of stories contain a deeper message, one that God has placed there for you. Perhaps that message changed your life without you even knowing it. Share that message with others so that they too can be changed. Then ask them to pass their stories on as well. Many of us want to make a difference in the world. We can do that one person at a time, one story at a time.

Chapter 1

Old Spice

Key Themes

- It is better to give than to receive.
- We should all share our gifts and talents with others.
- Selfishness can keep us from seeing the bigger picture.
- Seeing things from another perspective often causes a change of heart.

Scripture Connections

- Matthew 2:7-12 (The Magi presented Jesus with gifts.)
- Matthew 25:14-30 (Use your gifts wisely.)
- Romans 12:6-8 (We all have different gifts.)
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 (We all have different gifts, but they are given by the same Spirit.)

The Story

Offer the following introduction before telling the story:

- In this story, a son's love for his father is challenged by his hurt at having his gift rejected. But love prevails, and through time the son realizes his father's actions might have had a different motivation.

Each Christmas Eve, my three brothers and I, along with our younger sister, would nervously wait on Mama and Daddy to get home from work so we could open our presents. This particular year, I was especially excited because I had bought gifts for everyone in the family with my own money. That was no small task, as I was of limited income, to say the least, and ours was quite a large family. But I saved and guarded my precious coins and dollar bills all year so I could go Christmas shopping.

My shopping spree usually occurred at the nearest drug store where I could find a variety of reasonably priced items. I would carefully look at the handkerchiefs, ties, wallets, puzzle books, perfume, and toys, looking for just the right gift for each person. In spite of the great effort (and sizeable funds) that went into my gifts, they rarely got the appreciation they deserved. But, no matter, it is better to give than to receive, and I loved buying Christmas gifts.

This year I bought a bottle of Old Spice for Daddy. The box it came in made a great-looking gift, and it was a perfect size for wrapping. It was just one of the many gifts opened that Christmas Eve that found its way to my father's stack of presents. When we were finished opening all the presents, my brothers, sister, and I headed to the next order of business—our baths. That was followed by the annual tradition of putting on the new pajamas we had just received and waiting for Santa's arrival later that night.

Just after our baths, our neighbor from across the street stopped in. Mr. Holley was not our favorite neighbor. Maybe it was because of the time our ball rolled into his yard and he threatened to whip us, or maybe it was because of his foul disposition and the way he seemed to dislike kids. Either way, I stayed in the back of the house to avoid him.

After some time, I heard the conversation wrapping up and peered in from the hall to make sure he was leaving. To my horror, I heard Mr. Holley say as he headed for the door, "Well, if I don't get anything else for Christmas, at least I can say I got some aftershave!"

There in his hand—Mr. Holley's hand—was the Old Spice I had given to my father! I could not believe my eyes. I ran to my room and curled up, crying like a baby. How could Daddy give away the gift I had just given him? I was crushed. Okay, maybe it was a bad gift, but I picked it out myself. I paid for it myself! I just could not believe it.

My three brothers, in their best sympathetic fashion, immediately began laughing at me. They thought it was hilarious—first that it would happen and second that I would cry about it. Not surprisingly, Mama came to my room and tried to explain. Of course she's going to take Daddy's side, I thought to myself. She explained that Mr. Holley would not be getting any presents this Christmas. (Now there's a surprise, I thought.) Mama told me Daddy felt sorry for him and wanted him to have something this Christmas, so he gave him the aftershave. Of course, I asked why Daddy couldn't have given Mr. Holley something else, but I never did get a satisfactory answer.

Thanks to Santa's generosity, thoughts of aftershave were a million miles away as I awoke the next morning to a room full of toys and games. After hours

of playing, we all had to get dressed and leave our toys behind. The entire family was to gather at my grandfather's house for Christmas dinner.

When we arrived at Poppa's house, we began the typical family exchange of gifts. One of those gifts was a plain white dress shirt that my parents had brought to give to my uncle Tony, the youngest of my father's brothers. Uncle Tony was a little troubled this Christmas, I suppose, as he watched Poppa open gifts from his family. Uncle Tony had never gotten around to doing his own Christmas shopping this year, so when he received the gift from my parents, he immediately took the shirt, stuck a twenty dollar bill in the wrapper, and handed it right over to Poppa! Naturally my parents were outraged. How could he do that? It was just not right for him to give Poppa the gift we had just given him.

Thus was the conversation as we drove home. Huddled in the back seat, I listened quietly for a while. My courage grew, and I finally spoke up: "It's just like the Old Spice. Daddy gave my gift away, and you told me that was okay. What's so bad about Uncle Tony giving the shirt away?"

"This is different," came the reply from the front seat. Different. Yeah, right. No, it's the same thing, I thought. Now they knew how it felt. I kept quiet, thinking that somehow justice had been served. Just one day removed from the great aftershave incident, the culprit, my father, had been dealt a cruel ironic blow. How sweet it was!

Of course, I eventually got over the hurt of that day, although my brothers will tell you that I complained about it well into my adulthood. I finally was able to see the story a little differently. Yes, I was upset to see my gift so casually discarded, but perhaps I was being selfish. I gave the gift freely, and it was then my father's to do with as he pleased. I am sure it gave him pleasure to surprise Mr. Holley with the gift. And he chose *my* gift! It must have been a good one if he thought Mr. Holley would like it.

Perhaps Uncle Tony's motives were similar. He felt bad about not having anything for his father on Christmas, and he knew it was better to give than to receive.

To this day, I keep a bottle of Old Spice in my cabinet as a reminder of those times. A little splash reminds me of a childhood filled with memories of a loving family, a father whose generosity was often anonymous (Just where did Santa get all those toys on Christmas?), and the lesson that we should give our gifts unselfishly.

Reflecting on the Story

Depending on the number of participants, you may want to create small groups to discuss these questions. Be sure to provide adequate discussion time before bringing the participants back into a large-group setting for overall feedback and response. Another option would be to provide the participants with journals and invite them to write their responses.

- What is the greatest gift you have ever given to someone? What made that gift so special, and why did you choose it?
- What is the greatest gift you have ever received? Describe how you felt when you received that gift and why it was so special.
- Reflect on your answers to the previous questions. Did you list material possessions? If so, now consider gifts that are nonmaterial – time, friendship, assistance, and so on. Re-examine the previous questions in light of those nonmaterial gifts.
- Recall a time you received a gift you did not really want. What was your reaction?
- Reflect on a time when your parents made a decision that you did not like but later came to understand. What made you change your mind? How did you feel toward your parents after you reached the new understanding?
- Reflect on the gifts God has given you. How do you use those gifts? What gifts or talents do you have that you are not using as you should? How can you use those talents more wisely?

Breaking Open the Message of the Story

Preparation

The following activities will assist the participants in breaking open the message of the story. Choose activities that are most appropriate for the group gathered and the time allotted.

Gather these items:

- small slips of paper, one for each participant
- pens or pencils, one for each participant
- sale ads, catalogs, magazines, a few for each participant
- scissors, one pair for each participant