

Storycatching with a circle of friends

This study guide is designed to follow the chapters of:

Storycatcher, Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story

by Christina Baldwin (New World Library, 2005)

Intention: to provide a framework for people to get together and experience a meaningful conversation about their own stories using the book as a chapter-by-chapter conversation starter.

Potential Settings: book groups, writing groups, neighborhood groups, church groups, work teams, conversation cafes, libraries, neighborhoods, potluck suppers and living-room circles with friends and families.

See the book discussion guidelines for a single evening/one time conversation. The following is designed for multi-session use.

Commitment: ten weeks, or sessions, are suggested to build trust and comfort and follow the book, chapter by chapter. This conversational series may be experienced as a cycle complete in itself, enjoyed as the basis for starting an ongoing group, or held within an already existing group. Plan for about two hours each session, allowing time for greeting and leave-taking. If you are doing a series of meetings, several things need to happen in session one and session ten that may require more time so it may be helpful to schedule these meetings to be 30 minutes longer than the others.

Suggestions for hosting:

Size: you can follow this study guide by yourself, journal writing the responses; or do it with one other person as a way to know a partner or friend more deeply; or call any size group up to about 12. (Any larger and it's hard for people to have enough time to speak, and for listeners to hold the amount of story. If you have lots of interest, suggest that several groups form at the same time.) Ten people in a group is a nice size as it offers each person the chance to host one meeting and one chapter.

What you need to hold these conversations: Copies of Christina Baldwin's book, *Storycatcher, Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, (New World Library 2005) and people who are reading it; a comfortable setting with privacy and quiet; someone to serve as host (may rotate time by time). If your group chooses to write the weekly reflections, everyone will need paper and pens or personal journals.

It is best to refrain from alcohol before or during the gathering as it impairs the ability to listen and speak with intentionality. It's helpful to negotiate arrival and departure times

and whether or not (and how) newcomers will be welcomed and people released who need to leave before the end of the cycle.

The quality of conversation is served by creating a simple interpersonal container for receiving each other's stories and insights. Each member of a conversation contributes to this quality by listening attentively, speaking intentionally, and tending to the well-being of the group as well as their own well-being. The host should prepare seating so everyone can see each other. A circle is highly recommended. Please put a simple focusing object in the center of this space: a candle, flower, or object from nature will serve.

There are simple suggestions in Chapter 2, page 45 of *Storycatcher*.

To begin, the host may light the candle and remind people of the agreements for this conversation. Agreements may be adapted to meet the needs of the group, but suggested agreements are:

1. To practice the qualities of a Storycatcher. (Chapter 2, page 27)
2. To hold personal material in confidentiality.
3. To listen to each other with curiosity and compassion.

To shift from social/greeting space to listening/speaking in intentional conversation, the host calls for a moment of reflection, which may be silence, a brief reading from the chapter being discussed, or time to write a response to one of the questions at the end of each chapter.

Suggested formatting of time: adapt to meet your own needs and interests.

- Check-in so every voice is gathered and no one is interrupted (about 10 minutes). In check-in, a person offers a brief statement of how they are and what they bring to the conversation this evening. (For example: *"I'm glad to be here when we're talking about chapter five. Just today I realized where I am in the Spiral of Experience two years after my divorce, and I'm excited to have time to think, write, talk and listen about this idea."*)
- If you are using writing as part of the meeting, after check-in take one of the *Storycatcher* questions and write for 15 minutes.
- After writing, you may want to use a round of talking piece council to invite members of the group to share stories and insights (this round may take 30 minutes). A “talking piece” is any small object that is passed hand-to-hand and designates the person holding the object as the speaker and the rest of the group as the listener. It is a way to slow down interaction, to speak one voice at a time, to know when a person is finished (because they pass the piece to the next person). If the talking piece comes to someone when they’re not ready to speak, they may pass it on and have another chance to contribute at the end of the round. The use of a talking piece is not required,

but it does make the conversational process visible to all, and the role of the host easier.

- After this round, a period of open dialogue with the talking piece resting in the middle will elicit less structured conversation (about 30-45 minutes). This dialogue can be started by the host reading the suggested questions and the group choosing one or two to focus on.
- Check-out serves as a shift and closure from the quality of listening to informal socializing and leave-taking. Check-out occurs with a talking piece round so every voice is honored in leave-taking (10-15 minutes). During this time, make whatever arrangements are needed for the next session.

(Some of these terms, and suggested use of the circle format, may be unfamiliar. For more complete information on calling people into receptive listening/speaking space see Chapter two in *Storycatcher*, and also Christina's book, *Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture*. A complete booklist is available through her business website: www.peerspirit.com, which is set up with, secure payments options.)

The important thing is to design a receptive speaking/listening space that supports those present and respects the stories that will be shared.

For each session, the Storycatching questions from the book are listed below. They can be addressed in writing and/or speaking. The group may want to choose one or two on which to focus. The host's role is to help participants feel comfortable, to watch the time and facilitate the combination of structured and open conversation. Pauses are acceptable; silence is acceptable. Listening and not contributing is acceptable. The goal is shared storytelling and listening in which no one dominates or over manages the experience.

Session One: HOW STORY CONNECTS US

- Describe one of your earliest memories. Who is with you? Bring in all five senses. Do you know if this is an actual memory or a story you have heard others tell about you?
- Describe your relationships with grandparents or elders? How involved in your life were they? Did you or do you now know much about their growing up? What effect did having elders around (or not having elders around) have on your life? Imagine a conversation with a grandparent or elder who is no longer around. What questions would you ask? What do you wish you knew?
- Describe the place you come from. What is the landscape? Who lives there? Use all of your senses to describe the way you remember this place. Do you still visit?
- Choose a family heirloom or artifact and write down as much of its history as you know. Where did it come from? How old is it? How did it come to be valued in your family? Who has it now? What will happen to it in the future?

Session Two: THE ART OF STORYCATCHING

- Think of an important story someone has told you: How did you feel when listening to this story? If you had permission to share this story with others, did you? If so, how?
- Can you keep a confidence? Describe a story about confidentiality. What is important to you about confidentiality?
- What does it mean to be listened to? How can you tell when someone is hearing you?
- If you keep or have kept a journal, tell the story of that writing process: what is easy, what is difficult, what keeps you from writing, and what supports your writing?
- How could you design a space and place and time that would support a writing practice? What are the “rules” you need to break so writing is pleasurable and intriguing?

Session Three: WHY WE MAKE STORY

- What do you know about the origins of your family? Is your family history recorded someplace? Ask the oldest member of your family to tell you about how things were when she or he was growing up.
- The ancient stones are one of life’s mysteries. What other life mysteries are you curious about? Can you imagine a story that explains the mystery?
- Describe a time when language inspired you. It might be a speech, a letter, a book, or a conversation. What about these words inspired you? How did you react?
- Who is a keeper of the flame in your life? Why is this important to you? How do you support or hinder this action?
- What stories are you tending for your family? How are you preserving them? Have you written any of the stories down? Who will keep them after you are gone?

Session Four: STORY WAKES UP

- Describe a typical family dinner while you were growing up. Use all of your senses to describe the scene. Do you have fond or painful memories of family dinners? How are you carrying this forward in your family?
- Describe a world event that changed you. How did the world look to you before it happened? How did the world look to you after it happened?

- Describe in detail what you would put in the earth as a treasure for the future to find. What items would depict the life you know today? What would your treasures tell the people of the future about people today?
- Describe a time when you felt afraid. How did you handle your fear? How do you wish you had handled your fear?
- Did you have a special place to which you ran or where you hid when you were afraid, sad, or angry as a child? Do you have such a place as an adult?
- Create a journal entry that begins with “It was a dark and stormy night...” Describe this night in detail.
- What would you like others to remember about you? Create a journal entry that contains information you would want to leave behind to be found when you are gone.

Session Five: THE MAP OF A STORY-BASED LIFE

- Write a dialogue between yourself and someone you love who took a different path. Talk about how you felt about this person’s path — what it meant to you at the time, as well as what it means to you now. Write as though you would share it, even if you can’t.
- Describe a lesson you learned the hard way. How did this lesson’s cost affect its value for you?
- What are you willing to die for? What are you willing to live for? What could change your mind?
- Describe a time when you felt afraid. How did you handle your fear? How do you wish you had handled your fear?
- Describe a sacrifice you’ve made. How did it change you? Would you make the same sacrifice now, knowing what you know?
- Where were you at age twenty-two? What was going on around you?

Session Six: CREATING A STORY OF THE SELF

- Do you know your birth story? Who told you the story? Do you have artifacts from around the time of your birth that have been saved for you?
- Who are your real-life mentors? What have you learned from them?

- Do you have memories about the pivotal choices you made at ages six, twelve, sixteen, thirty, forty, and fifty? Write these in story form.
- Whether you are a peer or an elder, what is the hope you want to inspire in the young people around you? How are you facilitating this inspiration?
- Describe something you did that made you feel really proud. Where were you? How did this event come about? How did others react to this event? Did others' reactions change the way you felt about it?
- What do you see as your life's purpose? What do you need to set behind you to complete your particular life path?
- What would give you courage to continue your work in the midst of crisis in your country?

Session Seven: HOW STORY HEALS FAMILY HERITAGE

- How far back can you name the people in your father's line? In your mother's line? Do you have any stories that go with these people?
- What are some of the things about your family that you want to celebrate? How do you celebrate them?
- What are the unsolved mysteries that show up at the edge of your family tale?
- Create a legacy letter that describes in detail the things you wish to leave behind for those you love. Are there letters you want to write for specific friends or family members? Have you written them?
- Write down one thing you will forgive someone for today. Explain why you are willing to forgive them and what you will do. What action will you take to make peace and allow change?
- What decisions made in the last three generations are you grateful for? What decisions are you making now that you hope your grandchildren will be grateful for?

Session Eight: THE POWER OF STORY IN ORGANIZATIONS

- What gives you a sense of satisfaction at the end of the day?
- Describe your current community or organization. What makes you proud of it?
- Choose an accomplishment and write about it putting yourself in the story in the third person as a character.

- What do you wish to carry to the future from your community or organization? How can this be accomplished? Who needs to be involved?
- Put yourself six years into the future. Describe the community or organization you really want as if it exists now. What is life like? What relationships exist among people? What are you contributing?
- If all the people you work with were characters from a fairy tale, who would they be? Who would you be?
- Is there a founding symbol like the HP garage in your organization? Are you using it or ignoring it?
- Set aside a place in your journal where you note world events. Include press clippings, photos, commentaries — whatever seems important to you. Write brief responses to headlines.
- Write letters of condolence, concern, and celebration about world events. You may decide to send these letters to local newspapers or share your thoughts online, or just take time to honor the species story as it occurs.

Session Nine: HOW STORY SHAPES THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF OUR LIVES

- How did your religious attitudes change in adolescence? Youth? Midlife? Old age? What religious or spiritual rituals do you now observe? Why?
- What are the most meaningful spiritual experiences you ever had outside a religious setting? Describe a place that felt or feels “holy” to you. How has nature been a spiritual home for you?
- Describe or make a list of your greatest blessings. Think of ten ways you say thank you during the day.
- Think of a time in your life that was particularly painful. Did your spirituality or religious faith help you deal with the pain? How? If there was an absence of spirituality or faith in your life at that time, do you think that contributed to the pain?
- What are some of the mysteries of life that you continue to contemplate? What form(s) does your contemplation take? Do you discuss your feelings about the mysteries of life with others?
- How would you explain religion to a child?
- What secular books help shape your theology?

- What one gift would you take from the universe? What one gift would you give in return?
- Is prayer a part of your daily life? Write your own prayer.

Session Ten: TAKING OUR PLACE IN THE ORDER OF THINGS

- What letter to the future and cache of common objects would you leave for others to find? Where will you place it?
- How else might you help story survive?
- How will you bring the world into your journal? Into your storytelling? What narrative do you want to preserve?
- What is right in front of you that would be the right size activism to undertake? Organize this action and find the people to help you: tell your story.
- What practices of grief are you willing to explore? To help others explore? To make a ritual for acknowledgment so that it clears the heart for hope and beauty?
- What if you make a notebook of hope — collages, stories, photos — perhaps working with children to help them see all the good that is happening in the world?
- How many times a day, how many creative ways, can you express gratitude for your life and for life itself?
- Keep a little notebook by your bed and write down one blessing a day, one gift you have received. Tell that story.

This completes the cycle of ten sessions.

In this LAST SESSION the group has the opportunity to ask if people are complete with the conversation or if all or some would like to continue meeting.

If so, what would be the intention of that ongoing group?

Whatever the outcome of this question, this evening offers an opportunity for people to appreciate the process you have all been in the group. As a final check-out take the time to speak to each other about this.

THANK YOU for taking this time and for making this commitment to deepen your practice and appreciation of story.