

"Gentle yet convicting guidance."—EUGENE CHO

**D I M S U M
A N D
F A I T H**

HOW
OUR STORIES
FORM
OUR SOULS

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AN INVITATION TO LOOK AT OUR STORIES

*When Jesus lifts my head so I can see that he sees
me, I am purified, calmed, comforted, healed, satisfied,
and awed by him and his love for me.*

ELLEN PETERSON,
MISSIONAL ARTIST AND LEADER

Cold, rainy mornings marked the fall and winter days of my childhood. The smell of eggs frying on the stove and the feeling of a warm egg sandwich being placed in my hands are vivid in my memory. Goodbyes from my parents were sealed with a prayer and a kiss on the forehead. They were both there each morning when I grabbed my metal lunch box and slogged out to the corner bus stop. If the neighbors weren't looking, I would cut across their lawn to the lilac bush where the bus would come promptly at 7:30 every morning. I remember feeling so grown up standing there with my yellow striped umbrella and backpack that was too big for me. My five-year-old memory is fuzzy about the ride to school other than the feeling of tightly gripping my well-loved stuffed yellow bunny

that eased the discomfort of that lonely space on the big yellow bus full of unfamiliar faces. Though I had desperately wanted the Wonder Woman lunchbox my older cousins received that summer at the family reunion, I had a Holly Hobby metal lunchbox instead that might be considered vintage today. A matching plastic thermos filled with alphabet soup was a warm treat for cold days as our kindergarten class sat for lunch in the gymnasium. I can almost taste the soup as I write.

A round yellow Formica table with a swiveling center in my childhood home remains an essential part of my memory. It represents all things family. Meals happened there. Birthday candles were blown out and songs were sung as celebrations for young and old took place. Memories of homework and being disciplined were made there too. Chinese food was served with flair, and friends and family enjoyed the generosity of my parents' hospitality around that yellow table.

Dinners were always together. My mother served whole, freshly steamed fish topped with finely julienned ginger and green onions sizzling in hot oil, fragrant pearl-white jasmine rice, and fresh stir-fried vegetables packed with ginger. I can hardly remember a night when we weren't all around the table. Though the three of us sisters would have gladly enjoyed a baked fish stick kind of night, that meal never made it to our table. Long before kale reached its peak in popularity, we were eating lots of it stir-fried with ginger and garlic. Occasionally, we had spaghetti and other things baked in a casserole dish covered in cream of mushroom soup, which more closely resembled what my friends ate, but those moments were rare.

My least favorite meal, I must confess, was steamed fish. Tiny bones that got lodged in my throat left me unable to concentrate on homework all night. What's more, the house would smell of fish for days. When I invited my friends over for dinner, I prayed it would not be a steamed fish kind of night. Actually, I was nervous inviting friends over if it was an any-kind-of-Chinese-food night. I remember the horrified look on my mother's face when my friend requested butter for her rice. I had learned to remind friends to take off their shoes at the door and to call my parents not by their first names but Mr. and Mrs., but I wasn't prepared to tell my friend that butter on rice could be reserved for her home. Awkward moments like these highlighted what felt like a chasm between the cultures I was navigating, and I felt like a tiny bridge holding them together.

Weekend dim sum meals with friends and family, however, were the best. I didn't have to explain this meal to anyone around the table. This was our space. All our family's favorite restaurants were in Chinatown, and the owners and staff knew our family. A lunch gathering could not pass without an uncle or auntie commenting on the amount of shrimp each *har gow* contained and the price. *Char siu bao*, steamed barbecue pork buns, were a favorite and a special indulgence for my father. He grew up with very little in Hong Kong, so he always made sure there was plenty for all at our lunch gatherings. We piled the bamboo steamers high and stuffed ourselves with our favorites as if it was our first time trying them.

It is difficult to adequately explain to others just how important good food is to an immigrant Asian family. Food

reminded my parents of the home they had left and anchored us in our culture as a family. While the adults caught up around the table, us kids read books and entertained ourselves until the long meal was over.

Unlike the previous generations, my parents shared a mutual deep faith in God, which framed our family's values and practices. This involved praying together as a family at the close of every evening. My conversations with God as a six-year-old were a mix of prayers for our family and neighbors, but my personal prayers included consistent requests for him to change my straight black hair into curly blond hair and to exchange my small, brown Asian eyes for big, blue round ones like those of my friends. I spent a lot of time practicing those big eyes in front of the bathroom mirror, but I still endured the merciless teasing of the boys on the playground as they made fun of my height, my small Asian eyes, my flat nose, and anything else about me they could think of. I tried to laugh it off, run away, or find refuge in the classroom with my teachers.

However, those words still managed to nestle deep in my mind, as playground words often do. I decided early on that I would work hard in school to find a home in my achievements and good behavior. If people were not going to like me because I was different, then I would show them I could be known in other ways. I worked hard to quietly subvert the class bully by doing better than him in every subject. I created a strong, self-protective armor that would serve me throughout my growing up years.



It seems in many of my third-grade photos I'm wearing yellow-and-green plaid pants with a brown turtleneck. Those pants certainly contributed to the adverse forming of my young identity. The privilege of attending to fashion is not often the primary concern of an immigrant family. Though children of immigrants know better than to complain over their clothes, I'm confident I made sure those pants disappeared so that I would never have to wear them again.

WE EACH HAVE A STORY

You and I have a story that began long before we were born. In Psalm 139:15-16, the psalmist writes, "You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed." The reality of such truth can feel like too much to grasp. If this is true, why do we so often still struggle to experience deep worth and meaning in our lives? Reading these verses might even make us feel uncomfortable to be so seen by God, who sometimes feels distant and unresponsive.

We are all looking to make sense of our lives, to find meaning in the things we do, to feel purposeful in what feels ordinary and mundane. These longings grow with time, because as we get older, we may find ourselves more and more dissatisfied with the ways in which we have lived on autopilot. Paying attention to these longings will help our hearts begin to wake up.

When we are young, we cannot understand the full reality of our family structure and dynamics, our cultural environment, and the various communities we live in. Most of us can only find our way through it. We become really good at adapting on our own, even if we know God. We also find ways to numb our pain. God invites us now to untangle those ways and discover and acknowledge his faithful hand that has been over us for all our years.

Many cultures believe that our stories are intertwined through the generations. As an Asian American, it is difficult to speak of my story without referencing those who have come before me. Each of us has a migration story, although those who are indigenous to the land have experienced different elements of migration. Our journeys add layers of complexity to our family stories, especially as following generations may feel less connected to their homeland and their people.

As a little girl, I eavesdropped at the table while my aunts and uncles laughed and told stories of their childhood. Though their stories contained more pain and grief than ease and comfort, their ability to find humor in the most painful moments of their past tells me they found strength and resilience in being together. Perhaps humor provided the needed levity to face the challenges they endured. I listened to these stories as if they were fables of places far away.

WHY DELVE INTO OUR STORIES?

You may be wondering, *That's nice, Jenn. I'm happy you have some fun stories to recall. But what's the point of recounting our*

stories, anyway? I will venture to say if we want deep healing, then we must do the work.

We have all told our stories in a thousand ways, whether explicitly or implicitly. We have all believed a narrative about our lives, about who we are, about how we should interact with others, and about who God is—and all of it is deeply informed by our stories. Some of this shaping is good, but many of our stories have left deep wounds that have never healed.

My heavily fortified, self-reliant heart that emerged from my early elementary school years kept me from truly showing up in relationships until I was able to identify and tell my story in a fuller, more honest way. I'm still learning to do that, and God is healing my heart. I believe healing and connection are two big reasons why we do this work. When we tell our honest, unmasked stories to one another, we experience authentic connection with others, which contributes to our healing. Telling our stories also helps us to make sense of our lives.

There is no right way to dive into our stories, but one way we can begin is by sitting with God and inviting him into this act of remembering. Ask God to remind you of the stories that are important. You might find that one or two stir up in your soul. As they do, take a moment to sit with them. Feel the emotions. Think about the people, the places, the smells, the things you remember. In story work, it's okay to just let the story be what you remember because no two people remember things the same way. We recall our childhood stories through the age we experienced them.

We must also remember our stories with God. Some of us have some kind of relationship with God already. We may have known him our whole life and feel his closeness daily. Some of us may have a newly budding faith and want to grow in hearing his voice. Or we may have known God, but now he feels far away and disconnected from our life. Wherever we find ourselves, and whatever we think about God, he is here with us. He desires for us to know that personally.

Invite a friend to journey with you in your story work. Find a mentor, a spiritual director, or a therapist who will help you with your story. It takes courage to reach out to someone else in this way. But if healing, connection, and making sense of things are a few of the reasons why we do this work, then it is worth it.

Begin writing down what you remember. If you have access to photos from your childhood, spend some time looking through them. Pay attention to what you see, what you feel as you look at the photos, and what else might stir within your heart.

If you have family members, ask them for stories. Elders within the community might have some you have never heard. I had the gift of hearing my elders' stories, but some of you might not have access to your story in the same way. I grieve that with you. But I want to tenderly remind you that God, the ancient One, Creator of the universe, was there all along—and he will bring insight into your story in a way that no one else can.

Sometimes in new situations, old familiar feelings of insecurity can creep in reminding me of early playground memories. While those memories are decades old, these feelings

can seem to come on just as suddenly as they did back then. I have to remind my heart in the moment that I'm no longer that six-year-old wondering if she is worth knowing. I *am* worth knowing because my God knows me, as he knows and loves all of us.

We must begin gently and compassionately. Remember that God has always been with us, and he knows we have experienced both pain and joy in our life story. He knows our loneliness and our burdens, but he also knows our dreams, and he wants to walk with us and bring healing to our hearts, minds, and bodies. Henri Nouwen reminds us that “healing is often so difficult because we do not want to know the pain.” Sometimes, in order to heal, we have to go back into our stories and let God encounter us in our pain. Even if uncomfortable, the healing we long for may only come this way.

We have all been shaped by people and events in our lives, from the smallest interaction to a crushing or inspiring moment. Our view of how relationships work was primarily shaped by what we witnessed and experienced in our earliest years from our parents or closest caretakers. Our views can still change, but we cannot minimize the impact of our past in shaping us.

CHILDHOOD WAS HARD. FULL STOP.

Childhood was difficult for everyone. There is no way that someone can emerge from childhood unscathed by pain, though we all experience it differently. As my oldest son reminded me recently, we don't get to choose what our brain calls

hard. This is important to remember because we can easily tell ourselves a different truth about our experiences growing up.

An additional challenge for children of immigrants or those who are part of the ethnic minority is finding belonging. Trying to fit in with the ethnic majority is not easy or natural. When children of color try to assimilate, they may come to ignore the parts of themselves that are different. What's more, children who grow up juggling cultures often don't know what to do when home culture and majority culture values clash.

Home culture is defined as the place of our primary relationships. Parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family, and any ethnic community all make up an immigrant family's home culture. The host culture is defined as the culture that acculturating individuals move into. As an Asian American, it seems I am always adjusting and moving to fit in. To be understood or heard, many of us may have learned to do things a certain way outside the home, which could be very different from the way things are at home.

Shifting between cultures and spaces can be exhausting. It requires mental and emotional elasticity, and it's so easy to lose ourselves between spaces. We may not have realized that we learned about God through a certain cultural lens, through the values that are important in our specific cultural context. Even though many of us who grew up in the church read the Bible, certain Scriptures and truths were emphasized over others in each of our contexts. We always interpret Scripture through a lens we don't even realize we have. All of this informs how we come to know God.

We are being shaped by important moments and events that tell us something about ourselves, about the world, and about God. From the beginning, God placed in us a longing to be known. As Adam walked with God in the Garden of Eden, he was known by God. The psalmist writes in Psalm 139:1, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” (ESV). But if we are known by God, why is it so hard for many of us to begin the journey toward knowing ourselves?

HOW GOD SEES US

We can begin by noticing how God is looking at us. Let’s first consider how Adam and Eve’s journey began.

Adam and Eve were created to be in proximity with God. They cultivated their relationship with him while walking with him in the garden, where they enjoyed his presence and experienced deep intimacy and perfect harmony with him. God gave them only one command to follow. They had access to everything in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. “But the LORD God warned him, ‘You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die’” (Genesis 2:16-17). Essentially, God was protecting them; implicit in his instructions was his desire that they trust him and follow his commands.

But they didn’t trust him. Satan’s temptation came by way of a question: “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?” (Genesis 3:1). Which, of course, wasn’t what God had said. Only one tree was off limits. “You

won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it . . ." (Genesis 3:4-5). But the question was meant to shake them at their core. Why, if God was a good and loving God, would he withhold anything from them? Adam and Eve fell for that lie, and to this day, it continues to haunt God's children. They were created to be in perfect relationship with God, and now that intimate communion was over.

God went looking for Adam and Eve in the garden where they walked together daily, calling them out of hiding. "So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. Then the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:8-9). Their shame pushed them into hiding to cover up what they saw as their nakedness. As a result of their decision not to trust him, they were cut off from the garden and closeness with him.

The Old Testament tells the story of God's people waiting for a coming Savior. Just as God promises in Genesis 3:15, the offspring of a woman, Jesus, would crush Satan's head. The Son of God came in a way that no one ever expected: in human form. God's creation of humanity ultimately couldn't come back to him without Jesus' coming to us first. Without Jesus, we would be bound to the shame we experience in our failings. In our shame, the temptation is to hide. In hiding, we are too scared to be found and too scared to see who we really are.

We no longer have to hide. Jesus' coming made a way for us to experience intimacy with God our Father once again. He comes calling our name. "Come out of hiding," he says. He

beckons us into an eternal relationship that cannot be experienced anywhere else. God has always been looking for us. He is always invitational, never forceful, inviting us into authentic relationship with him. Will you come near?

NOT ALONE

Some of us have drawers, closets, or even rooms in our home that feel too overwhelming to clean. To take everything out to sort and clean it up might feel impossible. We can't do it all at once.

Similarly, we have places in our hearts like that. It's easier to keep those spaces closed and locked away. What good would it be to look inside those painful metaphorical closets? Let the past be what it is. There's no point in reliving the pain.

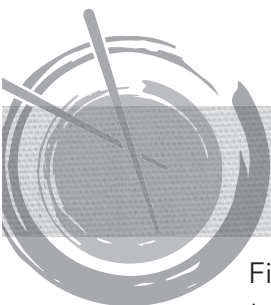
If we were to do this all on our own without God, I'm not sure what good would emerge. But going back into our memories and stories with God allows us to reframe our lives in the context of God's eternal presence and purposes for us. Our responses indicate we have stories that tell of pain; for though we might not remember, we can feel it in our bodies. Our bodies tell us of the wear and tear of the years, and we soon reach a point where hiding is no longer an option. We don't want to admit we're anxious, but our tight shoulders and racing heartbeats tell another story.

So, what do we do with all this? We've only just begun our storytelling. I invite us to pay attention to what's stirring in our hearts. Our responses are telling. Truthfully, however, sometimes we are afraid of what we might discover. We are anxious

to be found out. I felt this way as I started the honest work of coming to know my story.

If God knows us, we do not need to be afraid of knowing ourselves. It's often the parts we don't know about ourselves that terrify us. But with God's hand in ours, we can explore and question. We can be curious, as we are safe and we are held. A counselor once told me that real change and transformation happen not when we learn something new but when we want something more for our lives. I do want something more. I want to be free from my self-protective ways so I can live freely and love fully.

Learning to name our self-protective ways is an important step in our growth journey. What are those ways of getting through life's painful moments? It might seem that you managed to get through your childhood pain without it hurting you. Maybe you think you should have nothing to complain about because your parents never separated, there was always enough food on the table, and you have a decent education. But this is not about complaining. It's about naming. The psalmist reminds us in the early verses of Psalm 139 that everything about us is known to God and that being known is a blessing. To be known in this way by our Creator means we are safe. As we begin to name these ways, be reminded that the God who made us knows our every word, our thoughts, our ways, our darkness, and our light, and he loves us. More than we could ever know.



INVITATION TO THE DIM SUM TABLE

Find a comfortable space and invite God to sit with you as you rummage through your metaphorical memory box. Plaid pants, bamboo steamers piled with yummy food, and lonely bus rides to school fill my box. Memories of conversations around a yellow table and my plastic thermos with warm alphabet soup draw me back into my childhood. Just give me a whiff of freshly steamed rice, and I'm home. At the same time, I remember the eerie quiet of night and being afraid of the dark. What does home feel like for you? Notice what is going on in your body as you think about home. What do you smell? What can you touch? What do you see around you? We hold things in our bodies. Pay attention to where you are holding your negative emotions and stress. Notice your breath as well. Release this tension as a prayer of trust. How might God meet you in this space?

God, investigate my life;
get all the facts firsthand.
I'm an open book to you;
even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking.
You know when I leave and when I get back;
I'm never out of your sight.
You know everything I'm going to say
before I start the first sentence.

I look behind me and you're there,
then up ahead and you're there, too—
your reassuring presence, coming and going.

PSALM 139:1-6 MSG

What is stirring in you as you finished this chapter?
What was the table like for you growing up? Who
were the people in your home?

What pieces of furniture, clothing, or food do
you remember?

What is a childhood memory that comes to you?

What feelings and thoughts surface as you sit in this
memory? Where are you holding it in your body?

Relax your fists, take a deep breath, and release the
tension in your shoulders.

God, you are here. I receive your presence.

*Lord, you have examined my heart and know
everything about me. I can trust that you have always
been with me even if I didn't know you yet. I want you
to heal my heart. Heal even the places I don't know
about. Be with me as I remember those painful
memories that I don't know what to do with. Show
me where you were in those moments. I need to
know you are with me.*

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