



## Why Write Your Story?

When we experienced overwhelming pain as a child, we needed an emotionally mature adult to witness, understand, and help us make sense of our difficult feelings. If this didn't happen, we may have shut down, numbed out, or acted out. Our overwhelming feelings remained stuck in our body, nervous system, and parts of our brain that store emotions, images, and sensory details. Now, as adults, we may consciously or unconsciously avoid these memories. However, they are likely to show up as emotional triggers or physical disease.

As Christians, we know we will experience suffering in our lives, but Christ did not call us to be traumatized. When we write our stories of pain from childhood, trauma is transformed into suffering that is manageable with the help of God and our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Our Catholic Story Group, as part of the Body of Christ, becomes the visible, tender, and secure family that we needed as a child to feel seen, known, and soothed in our darkest experiences. We are no longer alone in our pain. This has healing effects on our nervous system and brain. We no longer act out of our woundedness but out of our redeemed self in the light of God's grace.

**“We all know that life will not be perfect this side of Heaven, but it can be powerful, and it can be redeemed.”**

-Michelle Benzinger, cohost of  
the *Abiding Together Podcast*



Christ on the Cross with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, St. John and St. Francis of Paola, Nicolas Tournier, Date: 1628

# How to Choose a Story?

We want to choose a story from childhood because that is the basis of our human development, and when our brain and body were most impacted by neglect or abuse.

Do you have a painful memory or fragment of a memory from childhood? If not, is there a present struggle that reminds you of a feeling or story from your childhood? Christian therapist, Dr. Dan Allender, who has used story work as a pathway to healing, writes that “the past is the place we developed our deepest convictions about ourselves, life, and God.” It’s true. Often, the childhood story that needs to be written is the one that is linked to a current challenge. What particular beliefs or struggles are you currently facing? What feelings arise when you think about this challenge? What’s your earliest memory of feeling this way? For example, Stella is angry when her husband doesn’t arrive home in time for dinner and doesn’t call her to let her know. When this occurs, she feels abandoned and unvalued, even though she knows that her husband likely has a good reason for not doing so. Stella reflects on times when she felt abandoned or unvalued as a child and recalls that her mother was often late picking her up after kindergarten, leaving her to wait *alone* in the school parking lot for what felt “forever.” When this happened as a child, she fluctuated feeling scared (e.g., “maybe something happened to mommy”) to mad (e.g., “maybe mommy forgot about me”). Seeing the possible connection between her present reality and what happened to her in the past as a child, she writes a story about being a kindergartner and waiting alone for her mother to pick her up.

Sometimes we aren’t even aware of our current challenges or distorted beliefs that we have about God, ourselves, or others. Below is a list of possible challenges that may resonate with you (circle the ones that apply).

- I avoid spending time with certain people.
- I feel used after spending time with members of my family or friends.
- God seems distant to me, even though intellectually I know He isn’t.
- I’m estranged from a particular family member.
- I worry that God is angry with me or doesn’t care about me.
- I have had a panic attack.
- I experience same-sex attraction.
- I sometimes feel out of control, like my anger is much stronger than my present situation warrants.
- I find it hard to trust others.
- I struggle with making decisions in my life.
- I’m afraid of being vulnerable with others.
- I avoid conflict.
- I’ve thoughts about taking my own life.
- I pull people close to me, but when they get too close, I push them away.
- I worry about what other people think of me.
- I’m afraid of failure.
- I will people-please to prevent someone from getting angry at me.
- I feel most safe when I’m alone.
- I often feel lonely.
- I struggle with an addiction (e.g., compulsive eating, drinking, pornography, social media, working, etc.).
- When there is a conflict in a relationship, I feel that it is usually my fault.

**"I write to discover what I know."**

**-Flannery O'Connor**

# Pray

Now ask the Holy Spirit to “show” you a difficult memory from your childhood that may be linked to a challenge or conviction that troubles you.

Write down the memory, image, or words that are coming up for you now.



## How to Write Your Story?

Just start writing. Handwriting versus typing will likely elicit more details. When you get stuck or don't know what to write, close your eyes and revisit the memory. What do you see and feel? Write it down. Write the story from the vantage point of your child self. See the example on the last page. Note, the story is told from the six-year-old who fell out of a tree and needs her “Mommy.”

Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. It doesn't matter for this exercise. Write without censoring to get at your instant feelings and beliefs about what happened. Spiritual writer Anne Lamott calls this the “sh\_tty first draft” or the SFD. SFDs are perfect for story work.

SFD

Next, type up your story and check the word count. Shoot for a length of 600-1000 words. If you have more than 1000 words, reduce the length by cutting out the backstory if you wrote one. We are only looking at including a single scene or moment in time (e.g., 5 minutes, an hour, a day), not your life story. If you described multiple scenes, focus the story on the primary scene and eliminate the rest. If your story, rather, is on the shorter side (less than 600 words), add more details to the scene.

## Adding more Details to the Scene of your Story

Sight: What can you see around you? Where were you (e.g., home, school, outside)? If inside, what was the color of the walls (e.g., yellow flower-printed wallpaper, light blue painted walls)? What was the flooring (e.g., green shag carpet, beige tile)? If outside, in what season would your story have been (e.g., Fall)?

Appearance: What was your approximate age at the time of this story? What did you look like at this age? (e.g., hair style, thin/heavy, short/tall). What did you wear? If you don't remember, take a look at some old photos and choose an outfit that you could have been wearing at the time of the story.

Characters: Other than you, who was in your story (e.g., parents, teachers, siblings)? What did they look like? What could they have been wearing? How did they look at you (e.g., with delight, disgust, a scowl, etc.)?

Dialogue: What did the characters in your story say? What did you say to them, if anything? Write dialogue that is true to what happened, but doesn't have to be the exact wording of what happened verbatim.

Feelings: What did you feel emotionally? What body sensations did you feel (e.g., panic, tense shoulders)? If you don't remember, reflect on the scene and note down what emotions and feelings are coming up in your body now.

Heat: What brings you to tears in your story? Where were you angry, confused, worried, betrayed, anxious, afraid, powerless, or heartbroken? Did you feel alone or invisible? Did you feel any guilt, shame, or disgust in your story? If so, write it down.

**“The past is never dead.**

**It's not even passed.”**

-William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

## What if I don't remember much?

It's not uncommon for someone with early trauma to not remember much from childhood. It was our brain and body's way of keeping us safe. If we could disassociate, then we didn't have to feel the full weight of the pain. Here are some ways that could jog your memory:

Pictures: pull up some childhood photos of you and your family. As you look through these images, what do you notice? What emotions are coming up for you as you look at your younger self? Grief, sadness, nostalgia, delight? Describe these emotions in whatever detail you can.

Places: use Google Maps to find a picture or description of your childhood home. What did your home look and feel like? What happened in that home?

Media: what shows or movies did you watch as a child? Using YouTube, can you find and watch a clip from the show? Was this show an “escape” as a child or did it resonate with something in your homelife? What music did you listen to as a child? What radio stations did you or your parents listen to?

Occasions: when did you feel most free as a child (e.g., outside riding your bike)? In contrast, when did you feel stuck (e.g., sitting at the dinner table until you had eaten all of your food)?

Smells: our sense of smell is linked strongest to our memories. What did your house smell like? Did your parents drink or smoke, giving the atmosphere a certain scent? Did your house smell clean or dirty? What did your mother's cooking smell like? Did your parents drink coffee? Can you smell the coffee brewing or on their breath?

Tastes: Is there something you ate as a child that is tied to a particular memory? For example, John's story was triggered when he started eating a box of macaroni cheese, something he ate often after his parents' divorce.



Objects: what were some of your favorite things as a child? Did you have a favorite stuffed animal or toy (e.g., Power Rangers figurine)? What objects gave you comfort as a child, like a soft blanket? What objects may have caused you distress, like the vacuum cleaner running or the front door opening when your dad came home from work?

Generalizations: these are things that happened over and over again, which you can include in your narrative (e.g., parents always away, an anxious parent who you had to soothe, a mean sibling). You may not be able to identify a singular incident, but you can write about what it was like as a child to experience these events in your home.

Read the example on the next page to see if it jars any of your own memories.



# Story Example:

Bounding up the tree's trunk in my blue shorts and pink t-shirt, I couldn't wait to get to the split in the limbs where I could sit dangling my spindly legs and resting in the shade. Long hair tightly pulled back in a ponytail, the day is hot. We are out of school for the summer, and I am down the street at Katie's, my best friend's house. I'm almost to the split limb when my feet slip beneath me. The next thing that I know, I am lying on the ground, flat on my back. Catching my breath, I let out a cry and felt a sharp pain in my left knee. Propping up on my elbows and looking down at my scraggly body, I see a mess of blood on my leg and knee. Rolling to one side, I push myself up to get a closer look. I have a gash along the side of my knee in the shape of an "L," but it's hard to tell. Glancing up the tree, searching for a cause, I see one of the high boards hanging precariously by a single nail, with the older nails exposed and bent.



Stinging, leaking knee, I sob and want my Mommy, but our home is at the other end of the block. Perhaps Katie went to get her mom in her house, which looks like a red barn. Whimpering, I don't want to wait. I begin hobbling home, making sure that I don't let the golden retriever out of the fenced-in backyard. When I reach the edge of the neatly manicured lawn at my house, I climb the octave of steps to the front door of our one-story ranch. Ringing the doorbell, I hope Mommy comes. But she doesn't, at least not for a while. I ring the doorbell again.



When she unlocks and opens the door in her bathrobe, she scowls at me. I'm sure that I annoyed her.

"I fell out of Katie's tree, and I hurt myself," pointing to my knee.

Standing in the doorway, she looks down and scolds, "If you hurt yourself one more time, you will not be allowed to go outside and play."

It's a death threat at six years old.

My whimper turns into full-blown crying. What would I do if I couldn't play outside? Roaming the neighborhood kept me alive and free. It's where I am allowed to catch bugs as long as I do not try to bring them inside the house. Outside is where I get to roller skate our U-shaped driveway or ride swiftly down the street on my pink bike with the flower-printed banana seat and matching handlebar tassels. Frozen at the thought of losing my outdoor freedom, I dried up my tears as my mother closed the door. I just stood there as the blood from my knee to my ankle continued to trickle and started to congeal.

When the door opens again, she hands me a washcloth and band aids to wipe off my leg and place on my wound. I was too dirty to be let inside. It didn't matter. I wanted to be anywhere but inside there.