

# *Parklife* – Listening to Stories as a Deep Missional Practice

SALLY MANN

A pioneering missional leader in East Ham, East London and the Senior Minister of Bonny Downs Baptist Church. Sally is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Greenwich, focusing on issues of social inequality and co-director of Red Letter Christians UK, a relational network for those who want to live for Jesus and Justice. <https://redletterchristians.org.uk/>.

Email: S.E.Mann@greenwich.ac.uk

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper offers missiological reflections on a sociological research project the author undertook during the 2020 Covid lockdown, called *Parklife* (Mann, 2021). The fieldwork for this involved listening to the stories of those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. This paper reflects on this experience and suggests that a deeper understanding of how stories work may serve to strengthen the creative, and potentially transformative, art of missional listening. To this end, it brings findings from the *Parklife* project into a conversation with Ricoeur's notion of the narratological self, interrogating the role that stories have in identity creation. It offers a set of working propositions for consideration in other missional contexts.

**Keywords:** Homelessness; Covid; Identity; Listening; Paul Ricoeur; Stories

## INTRODUCTION

I am a missional minister in the East End of London and a jobbing sociologist. These roles synchronized in a small-scale research project called *Parklife* that I undertook to explore experiences of homelessness during the pandemic (Mann, 2021). Now, as I reflect on the methods and findings of *Parklife*, I believe there are important implications for missional leadership. Here I suggest how and why inviting people to share their stories is a powerful missional practice, especially among the most marginalized communities.

When we think of stories and mission, perhaps the power of *storytelling* is most readily appreciated. We may even emphasize this side of the dynamic:

A missional ecclesiology demands a new story. The best response to the challenges in a complex world is to *tell the stories* of the church ... In a certain sense, the whole enterprise of Christian theology is about *storytelling* ... Leaders are *storytellers*. They know that stories make life possible (Niemandt 2019: 143, emphasis added).

Telling stories is an essential part of forming a missional community (Roxburgh and Romanuk, 2006: 71). Contextualizing and weaving together the cosmic gospel with local stories is an artform (Hirsch and Ferguson, 2011: 1343-4). Missional communities are 'story-rich' and our narratives invite others to join and find their place in a communal story (Morisy, 2004).

*But what precisely happens when we invite someone to tell us their story? Does this have its own intrinsic power?*

Reflecting on the stories curated in the *Parklife* project convinces me that soliciting and truly attending to stories is a concrete example of what Sam Wells calls 'being with', a practice of 'incarnational mission' (2018). Here, I suggest that a deeper understanding of how stories work may serve to strengthen the creative, and potentially transformative, art of missional listening. To this end, I interrogate what happens when we share stories in the light of some of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical notions. I offer the *Parklife* stories and the peculiar philosophy of Ricoeur to those considering the importance of biographical stories, who want to think this through at a deeper level and are up for a little speculative philosophy to achieve this. Ricoeur's work, and in particular his

later book *Time and Narrative* (1984), has been described as offering “the finest example of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics and is one of the most significant works of philosophy published in the late twentieth century” (Wood, 1991: xiii). I have more modest aims. I plan to develop some intriguing ideas Ricoeur has about narratives, time and identity. I have found these useful in discerning how and why stories are transformational. Ricoeur suggests that stories are the primary way that we make sense of our lives and the means by which we come to understand and represent our identities. Storytelling shapes the shared world between the listener and the storyteller. For Ricoeur, human speech and actions operate in a similar way to texts. This means that a story can take on new meanings and work within those who have heard them long after the storyteller has finished speaking. Stories are generative.

Mining the *Parklife* project for its missiological content has deepened by appreciation of missional listening as ministerial practice. It has also led to some working propositions which might be helpful to other missional leaders and communities.

## **THE ORIGINAL *PARKLIFE* PROJECT**

I am a co-vocational Baptist minister and lecturer in sociology. I have been researching experiences of homelessness for several years to explore how grassroots communities can assist transitions from street sleeping. My research includes the contribution of my own church’s advocacy project.<sup>1</sup> During the 2020 Covid lockdown I found myself working from home and spending the permitted hour of outdoor exercise in my local park. I noticed that a group of street drinkers and others I knew to be homeless had taken up daily residence there. Despite the shifting demographics of the park, they had maintained ownership of a circle of six benches around a cenotaph. I observed how this group were ostracized within the increasingly busy park. To my sociological imagination, my local park became a site rich with forced interactions between widely differing cultures. The park became a place to contend for space, to label those who felt threatening, but also a place for communality and care. I recognized

---

1 My church set up a separate community organizing charity almost 30 years ago [www.bonnydowns.org](http://www.bonnydowns.org) and a bespoke project to address homelessness in our borough [www.newwayproject.org](http://www.newwayproject.org). See *Looking for Lydia: Encounters which Shape the Church* in 2019, available from Amazon or [www.bonnydownschurch.org](http://www.bonnydownschurch.org).

many of those passing time at the six benches in my role as a volunteer advocate. I knew them as regulars at my church's midweek community meal. Covid restrictions had changed the way these projects operated. Spending time in the park with this "street community" altered the context of our relationship. To my missional eye, the park became a place ripe with the possibility to "be with" a community of vulnerable people I now had less opportunity to "do for" – to borrow Sam Wells' excellent definitions (2018). After an initial period of pondering about what I was witnessing, I asked for ethical clearance from my university and set up an ethnographic research project called *Parklife*.

At first, I simply observed interactions and chatted to people. Later, when I had become a familiar figure, and formal research agreements were in place, I began to invite the regular bench sitters to share stories with me. My methodology was participatory and narratological: I curated stories. To anyone passing, I was just choosing to sit on the same park bench for an afternoon every week and chat to people from the "street community". If they agreed, I would jot down notes about the stories they told me and invite them to tell me more. Undoubtedly, being a familiar face helped foster trust and I adopted the stance of moderate participation of "participant observer" (Howell, 1972).<sup>2</sup> My opening gambit was usually to introduce myself as someone who was interested in stories and ask whether they had one to tell me.

The *Parklife* project involved six months of fieldwork. It offered the opportunity to study huge numbers of everyday interactions and some exceptional ones. It was a snapshot of urban life which may well have been replicated internationally during Covid lockdowns while confined to the particularity of a certain place and the stories of a certain group. I found that stories were currency at the six benches. The park was rich with stories. Twelve participants, nine men and three women, were formal participants. Two of the women had their children with them. All twelve had experienced homelessness in the last eighteen months according to the UK Government's definition (gov.uk, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Four were in the "roofless" category for some of the time during the project. Of these, three had spent some months in hotel accommodation as part of the

---

2 I reflect on my subjective position as an activist academic in Mann, 1999.

3 The UK Government definition of homelessness includes: Rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping on the street); Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary, in institutions or a shelter); Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence, or staying with family and friends known as "sofa surfing"); and/or Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

*Everyone In* pandemic response in London, which saw 40,000 people affected by homelessness offered immediate, temporary accommodation in hotels and Bed and Breakfasts. One of the participants had refused to engage in the scheme and remained roofless or “sofa surfing” for the duration of the project. Of the remaining eight, six were “houseless” for most of the project, living in temporary hostel accommodation. Another two were currently living in insecure housing. For example one woman and her child were living with her grandparents and sister in a two bedroomed flat. Nine of the twelve participants reportedly spent at least part of everyday (defined as more than five times a week) at the park. The rest spent at least part of more than one day a week there. Most were recurrent contributors, meeting me repeatedly and adding to their stories or sometimes just passing time and watching people use the park with me. Alongside the formal participants were a wider group, mainly of “street drinkers”, whose housing classification I did not come to know. The majority of them appeared to be migrant workers who came to the park after their shifts. This group did not give formal consent to participate but had stories to share, which due to ethical guidelines could not be included in the research project. This group were sometimes an audience for stories and this shaped how they were told. Most of the stories were told just to me and these were often returned to over a period of time, either being repeated or expanded. How they were retold became an important feature of the *Parklife* study.

In terms of research design, the original *Parklife* project was broadly an *emic* approach in that it investigated how the street community thought and interpreted events. *Parklife* was intentionally set up to allow the participants to lead and shape the scope of the conversations and sought to understand the stories from within street culture. This later reflection is more *etic* in approach as I consider the original findings and draw conclusions from my own perspective as a missional leader, which is a different cultural perspective.

## **REFLECTING ON THE STORIES OF *PARKLIFE*: STORIES OF VICTIMS AND HEROES**

The stories curated in *Parklife* were as surprising as they were illuminating. Many of stories I listened to had recognizable themes. I heard many tales of victimization, of battling “the system”. I was struck by the personification of organizations and governmental departments – “the social”, “the housing”. Often these narratives pitched the storyteller against a personified adversary, one bent on denigrating them. Sometimes the storyteller would return over the

course of the weeks and bring paperwork to show me, official letters presented as evidence. Folded and well-worn, these were offered as the objects which framed the plot – the letter from “the housing”, the court summons, hospital appointments.<sup>4</sup>

“See ... [shows me a letter which appears just to be an appointment schedule] I had evidence. I have it here. They should have talked to my doctor.”

I ask for clarification, “Who should have?”

“The housing. They were bang out of order. I have all the evidence. See there’s this one back in 2005. I have this from years ago. I have proof. Look. I was under the hospital. They had no right.”

Or another time:

“They don’t give a fuck. They do it to get me down. They’d probably like it if I give in and just fucking do it.”

“Do what?” “Who doesn’t care?” I ask.

“Just fucking top myself. Here in the park. I could. I could. I won’t though. But they want me to.”

“Who wants you to?”

“The housing. Those. Those people. They don’t give a fuck.”

And later,

“Don’t tell the social I’m here.”

“They didn’t win. I got that claim.”

---

4 In places, the storytellers used strong language. This language is retained in order to accurately reproduce the reality of the stories (Editor).

Over the years, volunteering in a church-led advocacy project, I have heard many such stories. Encounters with statutory systems seemed to frame many of the life-stories I was told.

Less expected were the frequent heroic narratives. These included stories of intervening in fights, getting people out of trouble, overcoming the odds:

“It was kicking off here last night. Fucking mental. It was. It was. [laughs] It was the full moon or something. Fucking mental ... He was well out of it. No-one could get him straight. He was all for having it out with [anonymised]. I don’t know what would’ve happened if I’d not been around ... See him? I saved his life!”

“You know [anonymised]. She’s had it rough. Honest Sally she’s been right through it. All these fuckers taking her stuff off her and all. Not a penny ... She would not have survived without me.”

“I told him. I did. I got him down there [to the hospital] and I said ‘He’s not leaving ‘til someone sorts this!’ ... I stayed with him. Probably saved his life.”

“They’ve not won. They’ve not won. I’m not letting this go.”

“Who?” I ask.

“The social. They’ve not won. I’m not letting them off with this. They don’t know who they are messing with.”

The stories seemed larger than life and were often retold to me as others arrived in the group and provided a new audience. Sometimes people were invited to validate the story:

“I did, didn’t I?”

At other times there was somewhat of a contest around who was telling the story, a battle for ownership:

“Who’s telling this? Who’s telling this?”

Alongside the victim and hero stories were other stories of loss and bereavement. There was a quietness to these, and they were usually told to me on my own. These stories were often prefaced with “Do you remember...” or “You know... [this person]?”. It was clear that the loss might only be shared if I knew

who they were speaking about. I heard stories of three deaths in the duration of this project – of people’s close friends, all of whom seemed to have died from the long-term health effects of problematic substance use. These stories seemed less rehearsed, and I could not tell how they were being incorporated into any larger system of meaning. They were sad stories. I did not experience these stories being cast as victimization narratives. The deaths were not explained in that way, but simply as sad losses. The context of these deaths needs to be situated in the fact that homelessness and street life too often have fatal consequences. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that 726 people experiencing homelessness died in England and Wales in 2018. This is a 22% year-to-year increase and the highest since estimates began in 2013. Data suggests that most deaths among people experiencing homelessness were caused by drug-related poisoning, suicide, and alcohol-specific deaths (Aldridge, 2019).

There were many other stories gathered from the six benches. A few were childhood and teenage recollections, sometimes prompted by the presence of children among the group. But the prized stories were the ones about taking on systems, and of being a “face”, a known figure who resolved others’ problems and kept things in order.

Using thematic analysis to explore the *Parklife* stories, the primary theme was “victimhood”. The next theme was “tragic”, stories that could be grouped together as tragedies which happened to others. However, stories of “pleasant” events and memories featured next and a surprising number of these featured “heroic” personal content.

We all use self-authoring narratives. In thinking through stories from a missional standpoint, it may be useful to think about the relationship between stories and identity more closely. I suggest that Paul Ricoeur’s general framework, and his particular notion of “emplotment”, helps us to appreciate the extent to which a person attempts to make sense of their identity, their relationship to others and their place in the world, through telling stories. This suggests that inviting and attending to a story encourages the process of identity formation and can even shape it. To this end I offer a summary of Ricoeur’s broad framework and some of his key ideas which might shape how we perceive missional listening.



## THE BROAD PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF RICOEUR'S IDEAS

For Ricoeur, stories are an act of *mimesis*. Stories are mimetic as they attempt to reproduce events from one time or place within another. In Ricoeur's words, they are "the imitating or representing of action in the medium of metrical language" (1983/1984: 33). Ricoeur draws from Aristotle's understanding of stories and understands story as *mimesis*. He adopts the idea of *emplotment* to theorize how *mimesis* occurs. Every storyteller is therefore also an editor, choosing which elements to bring together or leave out, inferring or explicitly commenting on events, shaping the plot, bringing it to a resolution.

"Emplotment" is one idea within Ricoeur's understanding of narratives and identity. In a three-volume work called *Time and Narrative* (1984-88), Ricoeur described the relationship between narrative discourse and human experience. He finds that to be human is to tell stories. Stories are "the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience" (Ricoeur, 1984: xi).

At the end of the third volume, Ricoeur announces that his philosophical exploration has been in search of an answer to the question "Who?", "Who am I that I can be spoken of in so many different ways?" (1988: 274). He considers narrative and time to address an existential question of selfhood.

For those conversant in this field, Ricoeur's notion of the subject is not essentialist; he speaks of the self in terms of act and potentiality rather than substance. The subject's identity is not fully stable and tangible, but neither is it completely incoherent. Ricoeur's concept is not the completely decentred subject posited by Foucault and other postmodernists. Neither does Ricoeur fully situate the subject within language as Derrida does. The difference, philosophically speaking, is how Ricoeur handles issues of agency and being. The self, as Ricoeur understands it, is the idea and reality of a person capable of testifying to their own existence and acting in the world. This self has agency but is also acted upon, one that can recount and take responsibility for its actions. Telling stories is one way to exert this responsibility and agency. It is an act of active interpretation. Through the stories we tell about ourselves we aim to *discover* rather than impose a narrative identity.

Ricoeur's understanding of narratives has encouraged me to interrogate the nature of storytelling and attend to how a person attempts to make sense of themselves and the world through this. This approach asks me to set aside the desire to check out the veracity of the story. To use theological language, this is a true expression of "being with" a person (Wells, 2018). A deeper understanding

of how this works can strengthen missional listening skills. Even the most exaggerated and unlikely narrative need not be cast as “telling stories” but as the important act of story telling.

### **RICOEUR: EMPLOTMENT AND THE STORYTELLER AS AN ACTIVE INTERPRETER**

As we tell a story, we organise events in ways that generate meaning, creating an intelligible whole from many parts. Its’ telling “pursues and reveals meaning” (Ricoeur 1983/1984: 65). We choose where to position ourselves within the story and this is how we discover a sense of selfhood. Ricoeur recognizes that this sense of identity is not written on a blank slate. We have a pre-existing idea of how reality is organized, “a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character” (Ricoeur, 1984: 54). Moreover, in telling stories we actively shape and interpret this realm. We tell stories to make sense of the world, but this also involves fitting events, imagined or memorialized, into the framework of our worldview. We fit together the parts of a story, the “what, why, who, how, with whom, or against whom” (55) into “meaningful structures” (54) which pre-exist our telling of this particular story. Sometimes, this is very apparent. “Once, upon a time ...” invites us into a certain imaginary, but pre-existent, mental space. So does, “You’ll never guess ...”. These structures also open possibilities for future landscapes.

Many of the “victim” stories at the six benches took place in a world where systems were, at best, uncaring, but were frequently described in terms of their imagined malevolence. This is not my pre-existing worldview. Listening closely to the stories it was obvious that early criminalization and experiences of social welfare systems framed the lives of many of the participants. This was the world within which they were attempting to make sense of themselves.

It was not just the *Parklife* stories which seemed rooted in social marginalization and multiple deprivations. Interactions within the park were also shaped by invisible power structures. In the *Parklife* stories I found the primary interaction between other park users and the group at the six benches was one of outright avoidance. Occasional rowdiness and acts of deviance were perhaps reactions to ostracizing practices by the other park users.

Paths criss-crossed the circle of six benches, but these were rarely used by other park visitors. The circle of benches acted as a shibboleth. As well as circumventing the physical space, other avoidance techniques included not looking in the direction of the benches, passing by quickly, and avoiding eye contact. These were very apparent to me but not commented on by any of the bench participants ... I witnessed ostracising practices many times in the park. Perhaps the very act of gathering as a loosely defined group countered this to some extent? It is much harder to ignore a group of a dozen or so people. I wondered if the loud greetings among the group, which seemed exaggerated at times, and the frequently shirtless chests of the men, went some way to counter feelings of invisibility. (Mann, 2021: 131-2)

On reflection, the story's "spectacle" or setting may provide an insight into why "victim" stories featured so regularly. Perhaps those at the six benches knew how others viewed them and were attempting to make sense of how this had happened.

Personifying the structural causes of marginalization might be one way to explain feelings of persistent battle and threat. This "emplotment" technique situates the storyteller's identity into a world of battle and contest. The street homeless are not the only community to personify adversarial powers. Might there be some theological resonance here? An example of the personification of negligent social institutions appears in Walter Wink's analysis of *Naming the Powers*. Of course, the social context of marginalization was also a context for the "heroic" stories. These narratives confer dignity and status. They might be appreciated as similarly imaginative responses to marginalisation, as attempts to shore up identities for those experiencing social invisibility.

There was often a palpable feeling that the storytellers were trying to make sense of the things which had happened to them. Some stories jarred and shifted in subjective positions and grammatical tenses. The stories would ricochet in different directions if others joined at the bench, suggesting that the audience did indeed shape the story (a point I will return to in a consideration of how a story's meaning is co-created).

Sometimes "emplotment" involves dissonance as well as coherence. This too is telling. Ricoeur invites us to notice the "concordant discordance" as elements of a story fit into meanings and others resist them (1986: 66). This is surely how many of Jesus' parables work. They lead you along a known path and then subvert where you arrive with a discordant element (for example

Lk. 10.25-37; 14.15-24; 15.11-32). In terms of autobiography, dissonance may flag up shifts in identity creation. Elements of the story which seem to jar with the overarching sense of meaning may point to shifts in the way the storyteller positions themselves as they tell the story. Perhaps they are aware that they are revealing more than they intend. Or that the listener is not reacting as they expected.

I recall one *Parklife* story about a fight which had this subjective shift. It had begun as a glorification of the participant's role in a fight but shifted to describe how they held someone else back and "saved their life". Was this dissonance between aggressor and hero due to the storyteller's awareness that I was unimpressed by boasts of violence? Did they adjust their identity in the story because of this, or because they saw an opportunity for a more heroic narrative?

Riceour invites us to pay attention to stories as windows into the ways an individual attempts to sense of the world and their place within it. We should expect this to be ongoing and their sense of identity to be plural. Constructing a sense of self through narrative identity is "an open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation, namely, the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present" (1986: 207).

Working Propositions to consider in other contexts:

1. Learn to see the power of "story telling" inherent in even the most unlikely stories. Where it's appropriate, stop interrogating for accuracy, and listen for the authentic account of how the storyteller attempts to discover a sense of selfhood.
2. Attend to the frameworks of pre-existing belief implicit in stories. These tell us where a person is at as much as the events they recount. Also listen out for the dissonances – these are places where change might be emerging.

## **RICOEUR: STORIES BRING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE TOGETHER**

Stories are very interesting in terms of how time works within them. Ricoeur is a dense read on this, but it is worth the mental stretch. In *Time and Narrative* he takes issue with all preceding philosophical accounts of time, from Aristotle through Augustine, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger. He offers instead, and with planned provocative confidence, a hypothesis that “narrative is the guardian of time” and that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative” (1984: 3).

Ricoeur’s argument is complex. He argues within a tradition which has struggled to conceive of time in terms of how we experience it (a phenomenological approach). He suggests a definition which takes seriously how identities are constructed through narratives and how these create illusions of unitary time by bringing past, present and future together in a transitory moment. He sees this happening at historic levels, for example in the creation of national identities through the stories a society chooses to tell about itself.

It also happens at the level of an individual life. This is where, as a missional leader, I find his ideas most compelling. Ricoeur brings time, identity and narrative together:

What counts here is the way in which every day praxis orders the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present in terms of one another. (1984: 60)

The past is present in a story through the obvious fact that we are re-presenting events, but beyond this, there is the non-linear work of symbolism at a sub-textual level. The story is not merely experienced as linear, even if the narrative appears chronological. Telling a story draws on preexisting meanings from deeper, past stories. The meaning of a new story is drawn from ideas and themes in other periods, and they become present too. We recognize this in the presence of archetypes in stories – such as how we speak about heroes and villains. Repetition of recognizable stereotypes, inference and connotation to myths are present in the most everyday stories (Hall, 1999). They are not merely shorthand. They bring the past into the present, and vice versa.

Biblical parables, and all stories with twists, are especially interesting in terms of how time works within them. We are invited to rethink them from their endings. So, “to understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion” (1986: 66). Once we have heard them,

we may have to rethink *how* we heard them. Ricoeur describes this as gaining the ability to “read time backwards” (1986: 66) a process which involves coming to see that the end is present at the beginning and the beginning becomes meaningful at the end.

We make sense of events in an autobiographical story by pulling together a character which represents ourselves. This might be the narrator. We situate this subject within a moral universe where choices matter, and meaningful connections are made between events and effects. Emplotment is a “reading back into events” that opens up the possibility of reading forward into the subject’s actual future choices and actions. There is the potential for stories told today to change tomorrow’s choices and the way we understand ourselves.

The *Parklife* stories victim or hero stories may not be wholly accurate, but they can be transformative. Choosing to tell a story in, for example, a heroic way opens new and real potentials for how an individual may go on to act in future. Stories shape our future “being in the world”. Telling stories is a process of mentally organizing the past and understanding future potentialities.

Stories also work by making the future present in the story as they invite the consideration of how the story unfolds. I think of this as the “promise of sequels” that is evident in how the story is told and to whom it is told – its “speculation” as Aristotle says. If I tell you a story about myself as a victim, I may invite your protection and intervention. If I tell you a story about my acts of violence, I invite subservience or contest. Both of our futures are potentially present in these stories. They are generative.

## **MISSIONAL LISTENING AND APPROPRIATING MEANING**

When we listen to a person’s story and begin to try and make sense of it, we enter the story and the act of interpretation. Ricoeur calls this “appropriation”. Meaning is co-produced depending on how we receive the story. It is an interaction rich with the invitation of encounter. Appropriation, application and persuasion are involved as we tell and listen to stories (1986: 52-3). Just as the storyteller is active and generates meaning, the listener does too. Listening to another’s stories involves taking up a subjective position in the story ourselves. This is most obvious if we accept the invitation to identify with a character in the story: “Well, what would you have done?” “Do you know how that feels?” But it always happens as we imagine the scene and pick a perspective. In this, the listener is also concurrently producing a sense of themselves. Are they persuaded? Can they identify? Where do they see themselves in this story? What

ideas are they appropriating and what sense do they make of the story they are listening to?

Hence my sociological *Parklife* project was also a lesson in missional listening. It taught me to mentally note repeated phrases, how a retold story grew and developed, or boiled down to its essence. I learnt to pay attention to the use of hyperbole, the oration, the invited response and how the story changed given its “speculation” and audience. I realized that if I listen well, I might discern that something is happening in that moment, with the potential to observe and even participate in the creation of a sense of self. The storyteller is trusting me to see how they pull together a sense of who they are as they try to make meaning from the events of their lives. They edit and I pay attention to how they do this. Listening to a story is a space for “being with” (Wells, 2018). It takes time and the willingness not to cast yourself as a heroic character in this person’s story.

Perhaps the potentially transformative power of narratives is most present in the stories people tell in liminal spaces. Liminality is present at borders where an individual is both losing and gaining identity. Liminality can occur through being physically displaced, which was a very common experience during the Everyone In pandemic-motivated offer in London of immediate temporary accommodation, although often in other parts of the borough or much further afield. Where this initiative was successful, Everyone In offered the chance to undertake a process of change; to lose the identity of being “one of the homeless” and begin to see what else might be possible. But we are foolish to reduce homelessness to rooflessness. As many have demonstrated, and I have attempted to explore elsewhere (Mann, 2019b) a sense of belonging, of being a known character in a community, is a key pull factor to transition from the chaos of street life to a new identity in a settled community. It is almost impossible to make this journey unsupported and isolated.

During *Parklife* I noticed the pull of this familiar place in the park and how some would make long bus rides or walks to spend part of every day here. Being a known person in a familiar place shapes the stories we feel able to tell, the processes of “emplotment”. Of course, it is not just physical displacement that creates liminality. It can also happen as a person begins to cross into a new identity – for example from street homelessness to settled living. The stories told during these times can help or hinder future choices. I noted this in an earlier research project which involved spending a day walking around sites where one man had lived on the streets for five years (Mann, 2019b). As we walked and I listened I noticed that the subject of the story, the way this man “Dean” spoke about himself, fundamentally shifted when he began to recount volunteering in a local community project as their “Tea Angel”. He had heard

himself described this way and it now featured in how he described himself – as a person who was important in the work of helping others off the streets. The project he connected with, NewWay ([www.newwayproject.org](http://www.newwayproject.org)), was birthed in my own community and has the good sense to avoid replicating the power differentials inherent in the statutory sector. Instead, it uses an “alongsiders” approach, inviting people experiencing homelessness to connect through gardening, food growing, football and cooking. The advocacy part of this project is well embedded in community life. Dean had found a way to think of himself as a respected volunteer rather than a “service-user” or one of the homogenized “homeless”. This gave him a way to tell his story which was full of “semantics of action” and involved reading meaning back into his own story to see it as one of beating the odds. He was also now part of a larger heroic community, a bigger story, where there was a shared mission to end street homelessness.

In an earlier work, Ricoeur lays out what he describes as “little ethics”: “aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions” (1992: 172). This resonated with Dean’s experience of successful transition. The way Dean described himself was full of “concordant discordance” (1986: 66). His story was disruptive. It did not always lead where I thought it might. It challenged my expected appropriation. For instance, being in the places where he had slept out reminded Dean of mostly positive experiences. This was interesting as he also told me about the struggle he currently faced living “behind the walls” of his new accommodation. His mental health challenges were more acute now that he was out of the survival mode of street-sleeping. Ricoeur understood the discordance inherent in autobiography. He suggested it involves dimensions of both being and not being our former selves. Which is why, he suggests, a self is better thought of in terms of the question “who?” rather than “what” a self is.

Listening to Dean’s story and those from the *Parklife* participants changed me. This could be also described as one effect of appropriating of meaning from the stories I heard. Once a story is told and is out there “in the world” it is no longer just the product of the narrator. In its telling, another kind of work of identity formation is possible, one that takes place within the listener. My most vivid recollection of how this happened during the *Parklife* project was when one participant interrupted his own storytelling saying “Oh I know what you will say. You’ll tell me the story’s not over yet.” I often find myself using this phrase to invite someone to imagine a different ending for the situation they are in. In this case, the storyteller predicted I would do this and interrupted and possibly adjusted their story. Recollecting this, I shift my understanding of who I might be. Could I be the person who injects the potential for hope, the



subversion of an expected ending, in other people's stories? This is potentially transformative to my own sense of self.

A working proposition to consider in other contexts

3. Appreciate listening to stories as an act of co-production. A listener needs to stay mostly quiet, but where it's appropriate to do so, they can encourage new and positive employment through occasional questions which open new subjective positions: "What would you say to your younger self now?"; "What if this isn't the end of the story – what would you like to see happen?"
4. Reflect on how you have been changed by the stories you have heard.

### **SOME CONCLUSIONS: STORY-RICH PLACEMAKING**

*Parklife* gave me the opportunity to listen to stories of those caught up in the crisis of homelessness, observe their marginalization in my local park and witness their communality in a site over which they managed to retain a level of control. There was conviviality and a sense of being known among familiar faces. There was drama. I did not witness violence but, over the course of the project, some participants passed off newly acquired injuries and described physical fights as "one of those things". Many spent some part of every day at the six benches. I became convinced that many people fail to make the transition from street-sleeping because "mainstream" society is lonelier, less liveable, and altogether less inviting than *Parklife*. Transitioning from a chaotic life needs an invitation to a better, more compelling "story to find yourself in", to borrow McLaren's words.<sup>5</sup> Statutory intervention alone cannot achieve this. It takes community. And perhaps this is where healthy Christian community comes in. Could local, missional churches be the story-rich places where people are invited to become a known character and join a heroic mission to transform the neighbourhood, all within a grand narrative of resurrection? I believe I see this in my own missional church and in the work of grassroots projects like *NewDay* which are long-term, non-judgmental, radically hospitable and confer

---

5 From the title of Brian McLaren's book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (2013).

new identities. They are not just listening places; they provide advocacy and community organization. They take time to listen to stories.<sup>6</sup>

It is very hard to “out local” the local church. When it expresses mission through radically hospitable expressions of “being with”, it offers a place for stories to be told and valued. With some training, and an appreciation of the potentially transformative act of listening, these might become more effective in helping others journey well. The local missional church is ripe with drama and the opportunity to become a known character. It is also “placed” and offers familiar spaces to return to. Of course, this only happens if they are genuinely hospitable. For those seeking models of “being with” as a missional ecclesiology, Ricoeur’s theory encourages us that time spent listening to stories is worthwhile. It is even an act of identity recreation, the transformation of the self.

Working propositions to consider in a missional community or congregation

5. Invite people into in a story-rich community, “Remember that time when we ...”. Local missional communities are ripe with stories and rooted in places where people can become known characters. Let’s tell our local stories well and widely.

6. If you are part of a church, think through the stories you tell. Do they use dissonance and imagination? Do they intrigue, invite and discombobulate? Revisit the stories Jesus told, and as we retell them, let’s avoid prescribing how they must be understood. If you have sermons as part of your gathering, use local stories to shape them.

## REFERENCES

Aldridge, R. W., D. Menezes, D. Lewer et al. 2019. “Causes of death among homeless people: a population-based cross-sectional study of linked hospitalisation and mortality data in England.” *Wellcome Open Res* 4: 49 <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.15151.1>.

---

6 For reflection on remaining as a missional practice, see Mann (2022).

- Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage in association with the Open University.
- Hirsch, A., & D. Ferguson. 2011. *On the verge. A journey into the apostolic future of the church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Howell, J. T. 1972. *Hard Living on Clay Street: Portraits of Blue Collar Families*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Mann, S. 2019a. “Making it count: Learning from a knowledge exchange with voluntary sector workers and software providers, and data from auto/biographical reflection as an activist academic.” *Methodological Innovations* 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799119889570>.
- Mann, S. 2019b. “Conducting a Walking Interview to Explore Pathways Out of Persistent and Recurrent Homelessness.” *European Journal of Homelessness* 13(2). [https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2019/EJH/EJH\\_13\\_2/2019\\_Vol13\\_No2\\_ResearchNote-2.pdf](https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2019/EJH/EJH_13_2/2019_Vol13_No2_ResearchNote-2.pdf).
- Mann, S. (2021). “Parklife: Stories and Spaces in Lockdown” *European Journal of Homelessness* Volume 15, Issue 2 [https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2021/EJH\\_15-2/EJH\\_15-2\\_RN1.pdf](https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2021/EJH_15-2/EJH_15-2_RN1.pdf).
- Mann, S. 2022. *Remainer Reflections: Following Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of Sepphoris*. <https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts/>.
- Morisy, A. 2004. *Journeying Out: A new approach to Christian mission*. London: Continuum.
- Niemandt, N. 2019. “Missional leadership: Transforming stories”, in *Missional Leadership* (HTS Religion & Society Series) 7: 141-9, Cape Town: AOSIS. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2019.BK108.08>.
- Ricoeur, P., K. Mclaughlin & D. Pellauer (1984, 1985, 1986). *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roxburgh, A. J., & F. Romanuk. 2006. *The Missional Leader: Equipping your church to reach a changing world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Watkins, C. Theology and Action Research Network, <https://theologyandactionresearch.net> [accessed 16/04/21].
- Wells, S. 2018. *Incarnational Mission: Being with the world*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.
- Wink, W. 1984. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Wood, D. (ed). 1991. *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative And Interpretation*. London: Routledge. Now published as a free to access e-book on <https://vdoc.pub/documents/on-paul-ricoeur-narrative-and-interpretation-5q9eu2mu1fr0#>.