

Stories of our lives

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

I have often been compared to my father. Though I neither look nor sound like him, I seem to have his temperament, some of his intellectual gifts and some of his vices. We have also followed a similar trajectory in our vocations.

These comparisons and references have increased over the past year, since he is one of my predecessors as dean of Duke Divinity School. He had served as dean for only 18 months when, in July 1982, he died suddenly of a heart attack.

I have often reflected on the unexpected ways in which our lives have continued to intersect even after his death. In my current position, I frequently encounter friends, colleagues and acquaintances of my father. They tell me stories about participating with him in the Methodist Student Movement or sharing caravan trips of young adults. Some speak appreciatively of his years as editor of motive magazine, while others recall him as a preacher and teacher. Through their stories, I have learned a lot about my father's life as a youth and young adult--stories I had hoped I would one day hear him tell.

Just last month I encountered a story written by my father that I did not know existed. It was given to me by my wife's brother. He never met my father, but he found in a used bookstore a collection of essays titled *Highways to Faith: Autobiographies of Protestant Christians* (1954) that includes an essay "Doing Changes Living," by Jameson Jones.

I was surprised to discover this story, not least because my father was always reticent about himself and his faith. I have always regretted not having the opportunity to sit down with him for a long talk about his growing-up years, the kind of conversation I was privileged to have with each of my grandfathers. But I also knew that my father would likely have deflected any such conversation, indicating that others' lives were more worthy of reflection than his own.

I have come to share that emphasis on telling the lives of saintly others. In this era of television talk shows and countless "as told to" autobiographies, we are afflicted

by too many people who think their lives are infinitely more interesting than they are. This is a problem that also tempts preachers. Too many sermons seem designed to glorify the preacher's life rather than God. I want to hear less about the preacher and more about God and the transformative power of the gospel.

Even so, there are people whose life stories are interesting and compelling. Their autobiographies offer us significant resources for loving and knowing God more faithfully and truthfully. But the power of autobiography for such purposes depends significantly on how the story is told. Contrast, for example, the "confessions" written by Augustine with those written by Rousseau: Augustine gives an account of his life by drawing attention to God, whereas Rousseau draws attention to himself. Indeed, Rousseau deliberately crafts a counternarrative to Augustine's, shifting the focus of the story from God to the self. Rousseau is the patron saint of modern autobiography.

I am wary of autobiographies precisely because of such self-centeredness. That has been intensified by the ways in which television and pop best sellers have sensationalized and trivialized the difficult task of autobiography. In our time, even those who seek to praise God through the telling of their stories often inadvertently end up giving God second-billing.

Yet there remains something powerful and compelling about hearing people tell the stories of their own lives. I am grateful to have discovered--even 16 years after his death--that my otherwise reticent father had, at least on one occasion, told the story of how God was working in his life.

I recently attended a consultation on "the vocation of theological teachers." As the participants described diverse senses of vocation, and how vocation had shaped their identities as scholars, teachers, parents, pastors and friends, we found ourselves telling stories. Some of the stories were from our own lives, while others were about saintly mentors whose encouragement at pivotal times had enabled us to go on.

During those conversations, several people expressed wariness about becoming self-indulgent in our storytelling--a wariness with which I resonated. At the same time, however, I was convinced it was important to tell our stories in the context of our consultation--to identify how God had been working in our lives to shape our vocations as theological teachers. Such storytelling reveals the interrelated webs

that constitute the fabric of our lives and locates us in the larger drama of God's journey with God's people.

I continue to believe that Christians ought to be wary of autobiography, particularly in a culture that gives us ample opportunities for self-indulgence. There is an appropriate--indeed, crucial--sense in which we ought to focus our attention on God and on the role of saintly mentors. We ought to lift up, in our congregations and in our culture, the stories of those who enable us to see God and the transformative power of the gospel more clearly and faithfully.

Even so, we ought not fail to tell the story of our lives to and with one another. As Augustine's *Confessions* so powerfully teaches us, we can reflect on our own lives in ways that reveal the gifts God has given to us, help others understand our vocations, and draw attention to saintly mentors whose lives have made such a crucial difference in our own. The real question is not whether we tell the story of our lives. It is whether we will do so in ways faithful to our vocation to love and know God in all that we are and do.