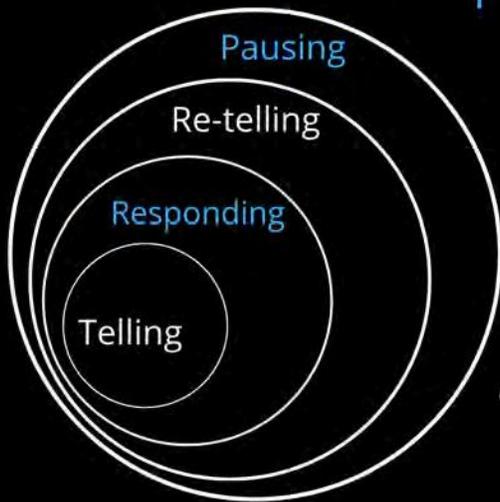


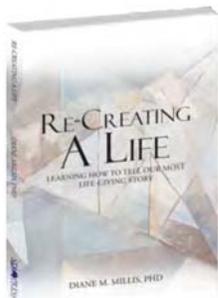
# ~ NARRATIVE CIRCLES ~

## THE POWER OF 4, 4, 4



*"It takes a community to learn how to tell our most life-giving story."*

~ DIANE M. MILLIS, PHD



*Editor's Note: Diane will lead a 90-minute webinar and demonstration on Narrative Circles - A New Approach to Group Spiritual Direction on May 21, 2019. [Register here.](#)*

*Please remember that the webinar is recorded and may be viewed for at least a year after its posted. So, if you have a conflict on May 21, you can still participate and what's more, you can review it as many times as you like. [Learn more here](#) and save 20 percent off the price of Diane's new book. ☺*

## OUR "4, 4, 4"

BY DIANE M. MILLIS,

It was only the first week of Eastertide, and already I was experiencing the promise of new life as I sat encircled by three of my students: Vicki, Kyle, and Diana. Tears filled my eyes as I watched each of them open our book, *Re-Creating a Life: Learning How to Tell Our Most Life-Giving Story*, for the first time. I refer to it as our book as it stemmed from what we had practiced within our classroom community.

Two years ago, when I had been invited to serve as a consultant at this seminary to implement a grant they had just received from the Association of Theological Schools, I would scarcely have imagined this moment and the sense of communion I now shared with these students.

At that time, I had been hired to facilitate workshops for the seminary faculty, as well as design a new course, on how to tell redemptive stories. Yet, as a spiritual director,

I knew I could not teach anyone how to tell a redemptive story; I could only create the conditions that would increase the likelihood that they would do so.

### Partners

It is a precious gift to gather with one or more persons who help us increase our awareness of the life-giving aspects of our stories we may otherwise miss. We need partners who are willing to convey what they noticed in us and in themselves as we told our story, what they appreciated and learned from the stories we shared and offer the questions they wondered about as they listened. We need companions who won't allow us to settle for thin narratives but encourage us to continue to listen for the incarnate and enigmatic expression of the Holy, or however one names the ground of all being. We need friends who challenge us to consider alternative ways

*(continued on page 9)*



*Diane Millis and Diana Turner at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities*

*(continued from page 8)*

of naming and narrating how Mystery is at work in the stories we tell.

We don't need to be trained as a spiritual companion in order to serve as a sacred conversation partner. Yet, my hope is that more of us who are trained as spiritual directors will convene groups that invite people to experience and practice deep listening, as well as introduce them to prompts and a process for doing so.

### Prompts

Tell me your story. When asked, most of us resort to rehearsed narratives: where we're from, what we do for a living, and what distinguishes us from others (e.g., my mother died when I was seven). Yet, as spiritual companions we know that each of our lives is an unfolding story and there is more than one way to tell any story. It's not what we've experienced that defines us, but the stories we tell about our experiences.

Learning how to tell our most life-giving story requires really good questions in addition to really good conversation partners. Questions such as: Who is the protagonist in your story? Who are its heroes and villains? What is the story of your best possible self? (For an extensive menu of narrative prompts, see *Re-Creating a Life*.)

### Process

Telling our story is risky. We won't do so unless we feel that what we share will be heard and honored. For over a decade, I have been experimenting with formats for inviting participants in communities of small groups to hear into speech one another's stories. I have found that the 4, 4, 4 process provides safety, ease, and accessibility for groups of all ages and backgrounds.

It is a highly structured process where every participant is given the same amount of time to speak without cross talk, hear others' responses to their story and retell their story:

**Telling:** The focus person shares their story in response to one of the prompts | Up to 4 minutes

**Responding:** Listeners take turns contributing their responses to the story | Up to 4 minutes

I noticed...

I appreciated...

I wondered...

**Retelling:** The focus person describes what s/he is discovering about her or his story | Up to 4 minutes

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**Pausing:** Participants share time in silence to honor what has been shared | Up to 1 minute

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As we sat together that Eastertide afternoon, Diana described how the effects of that semester still ripple in her life:

“Self-awareness, introspection and self-healing have been my focus for decades, yet the manner in which I felt valued and ‘heard through to speech’ provided a chance to be vulnerable in a way that led me to deeper understanding of my limiting beliefs.”

Inspired by her experience in our narrative circles, Diana is currently at work designing an online platform for bringing the 4, 4, 4 storytelling process into the public square.

Let’s follow Diana’s lead. I invite you to consider how you might use Narrative Circles and the 4, 4, 4 approach in your ministry:

- How might you convene and facilitate groups of conversation partners to explore their sacred stories?
- How might you introduce more narrative prompts into your conversations with those you companion?

- How might you draw upon or adapt the 4, 4, 4 process within the settings in which you serve?



For three decades, **Diane Millis** has had the privilege of serving as a midwife for others as they give voice to the vast array of stories inside of them. She has taught and advised undergraduate and graduate students; consulted and coached in a wide array of sectors; facilitated retreats and is one of the most popular workshop leaders at SDI Conferences. She is the author of the new book by SDI Press, *Recreating a Life: How to Tell Our Most Life-Giving Story*. She lives in Minneapolis and currently teaches at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.