



## Telling Trauma's Story

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Book publishing and church pastoring share a vocational aim: meaningful storytelling. A book can change your life with its story. So can the church. The church can mold your personal story, help you make sense of good and evil, shape your imagination for what is possible. So can a book. Stories inform our identity, our worldview, our beliefs, our values.

Until those stories are disrupted.

For the past year, our lives and assumptions have been upended by Covid-19 – a [mass trauma](#),<sup>1</sup> as a recent BBC article described the global pandemic. The story of our identities as workers has been thrown into chaos by unemployment. The story of our identities as people who are loved has been tested by social distancing. The story of community has had its cover blown as people refuse to protect one another by wearing facemasks.

This is what trauma does. Trauma disrupts our expectations, our worldviews, our beliefs. It forcefully interrupts life and dares us to make meaningful stories out of pain. In response, we reframe, retool, and reassess our existing stories. We mourn, we deny, we rage, we take a nap. We wrestle until finally our stories are stretched to hold the disruption in perspective.

(By contrast, the response of stress to a life disruption indicates that our existing stories have held up to the challenge, leaving our identities and worldviews intact – if perhaps a bit bruised and weary. To the other extreme, the development of post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the utter displacement of our stories, mocking our cornerstones of meaning through the sustained interruption of experience or memory.)

Every person and community have been disrupted this past year, no matter if our experience of Covid-19 can be characterized as stress, trauma, or PTSD.

Collectively, we have a desperate need to make sense of what has happened and what we will do next. We need stories, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the post-pandemic church (as well as post-pandemic publishers).

For the hard and necessary storytelling work ahead of us, a few quick tips from one trauma-surviving storyteller to another:

- The best stories – whether in a book or in church – will be those that make room for pain without easy answers.
- The best stories will take evil seriously, but they also will challenge the swift hero. (Anyone who can remedy a story’s trauma lickety-split should be considered suspect. That includes God, the pastor, the gallant knight, the rallying politician ... and everyone in between.)
- The best stories will be multi-dimensional, appreciating that every person is complex and contextual. I am not my PTSD, you are not your grief, we are not our Zoom images. We are whole people, with whole stories that we need to tell and have heard.

The world needs honest storytellers to renew the stories that have been upended by Covid-19, to make room on our spiritual pages for the breadth of hope and the depth of pain, to ensure that no trauma survivor is left alone without a good word that tucks them into the folds of love. This is the church’s work. The Word calls us to it.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210203-after-the-covid-19-pandemic-how-will-we-heal>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Rachel Hackenberg is the Managing Editor for The Pilgrim Press and Faith-Forming Publications for the United Church of Christ.

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