

STORY | THEOLOGY | VOICE

FULLER

STORY TABLE GUIDE

“The disciples came up and asked, ‘Why do you tell stories?’ He replied, ‘You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight.’”

—MATTHEW 13:10–13, *THE MESSAGE*

STORY TABLE GUIDE

The Story Table is an outgrowth of FULLER studio at Fuller Theological Seminary and coordinates thematically with the most recent issue of the companion FULLER magazine.

The intention of the Story Table is to create a space for unheard stories. Unlike a conference table or lecture hall, the Story Table borrows its mood from the familiar, intimate space of the dinner table. There, stories come to life that have the power to leave us changed.

The Story Table hosts a small group of “Storytellers”—comprised of friends or strangers—sharing stories and a meal around a dinner table with a room full of silent but invested Witnesses. Stories are told, heard, and carried away with the recognition of their sacred nature.

What follows are some guidelines that we have recorded to help preserve the integrity of the Story Table.

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Every Story Table has a theme

Story Table is not a time to share entire life stories, but rather memorable experiences in the lives of the participants, centered around a shared theme of concern: women in ministry, reconciling race, addiction and recovery, vocation and formation, etc.

- When picking your theme, consider the “pain points” in your community that storytelling might help inform and alleviate.
- Is the topic relevant and integral to your community?
- Will bringing this topic to life through stories be an appropriate next step for cultivating healing, change, or growth in your community?
- Some topics will be more sensitive than others for your community. Have you laid the groundwork through other conversations in order to enter into the raw and real experience of storytelling? Where necessary, are there resources for people to continue to process what happens around the table?

Selecting Storytellers

The Storytellers that you invite to sit at the Story Table will shape the feel of the evening. Because the goal is to provide a space for stories literally “missing from the table,” it is important to have a diversity of Storytellers and Witnesses represented.

- Begin by choosing 5-7 people affiliated with your community.
 - Remember that you are sitting around a dinner table and you will lose intimacy with too many people and flow of the conversation with too few people.
- Think about diversity in age, gender, race, education, socio-economic background, and experience/affiliation with your church or organization.
 - If your group is homogenous in one of the above categories, think creatively about how you can create a chorus of diverse voices and experiences at the table. (e.g. if everyone at your Story Table is white, try for diversity in gender, neighborhood, age, or education).
- Choose Storytellers who can speak to the pain points you are facing without turning the dinner into a platform for opinions, political views, or favorite causes.
- Make sure Storytellers have personal experiences with the theme at hand and can (and are willing to) offer personal stories.





Inviting Witnesses

Story Table is similar to theater in that the event loses meaning without an audience to hear and interpret it. Think about witnessing a powerful performance that transforms understanding of friendship, or sorrow, or God in a way that prompts sharing that experience with others. Similarly, Witnesses are key to the Story Table because each one bears the truth of experience in his or her own sphere of influence. In some cases, not inviting the right Witnesses means that the stories go unheard by the most crucial audiences.

- Who needs to hear the Storytellers most in the wider community? (Who are people in positions of power/privilege to effect transformation?)
- It is helpful to brainstorm a list of “people of influence” in the community and then ask these individuals to suggest people who would benefit from attending the Story Table—again, emphasizing a wide diversity of audience members.
 - This helps prevent inviting people only within same circles and overcomes blind spots.
- Consider the size of your space and the feel of the evening: too many witnesses risks losing the intimacy of the evening, however, a hushed crowd can make for a powerful atmosphere. Make sure that Witnesses are clear that they are invited to listen only.
- ◦ Recording video or audio of the evening is a great way for a wider scope of people beyond the primary Witnesses to benefit from the richness of the Story Table experience; however, it must be done with discretion, without interrupting the storytelling process.

Everyone Eats

At the core, the Story table is about hospitality. People feel more welcome in an unfamiliar or even contentious environment when they share a meal together. Sharing food is an intimate practice that breaks down barriers, and will help build connections at the Story Table that may take Witnesses and Storytellers to a deeper level of relationship.

Rule of thumb: it is better to serve everyone soup than to serve only the Storytellers a steak dinner.

- Pick a menu that feels special but simple and matches the tone of the evening.
- If possible, homemade food (with oversight) is preferable.
 - The purpose of preparing homemade food is not a matter of saving money but rather of being mindful and welcoming. Think intentionally about individuals who have a gift for cooking and would like to contribute to the Story Table by sharing their gifts. Display and serve the meal thoughtfully, beautifully.
 - If catered, think about how the feeling of the food and the surrounding ambiance matches the tone of the event—avoiding what feels like a business lunch or a cocktail party.





Theology of Space

Think theologically about the space in which to host the Story Table. This requires thinking about hospitality as places in the community that hold special significance or memories core to the community. Think outside the normal confines of a gathering or dinner: is the group contentious about a church sanctuary or a basketball court? Has there been a recent tragedy or upheaval in a shared space? Set up the Story Table in that space and transform the memories that are shared there.

- Is the space meaningful to the community?
- It is accommodating in its convenience and accessibility? (For the host, the Storytellers and for the Witnesses)
- If outside, or in a space with poor acoustics, make sure all the Witnesses are able to hear the Storytellers.
- When without control over the meeting place, make that space meaningful.
 - Consider using flowers, candles, and other décor to make a familiar space feel special. Keep in mind that the décor ought to match the tone of the evening.
- The end goal is to cultivate a space that feels as inviting as eating dinner in a friend's home.



Choosing Your Moderator

This may sound obvious, but it is important to state from the start: the Story Table may take place in an environment where there are pastors or academics who are used to preaching or giving lectures. This kind of format may feel foreign at first to both Storytellers and Witnesses. It is crucial to have a moderator who can guide the conversation and set expectations.

- When picking the moderator, consider if he or she has a natural inclination for storytelling. Does he or she enjoy listening to how stories weave together?
- The moderator may set the tone of the evening by helping the Storytellers and Witnesses know what to expect: what is the theme? Why is it important to the community? Or, an additional host may do this as well.
- Once the evening begins, the role of the moderator is to guide the Storytellers through the evening.
 - Has everyone sitting at the table been heard?
 - Are there any common themes in the stories? How can those threads be followed?
 - Does the moderator understand the arc of a conversation that has a beginning, middle, and an end?
 - Is the moderator capable of handling emotional situations before they get out of control?
 - The moderator should be hospitable, capable of drawing out stories, able to sit in quiet or fill dead space without making the moment about him or her. It should be someone trusted but not necessarily in authority, someone naturally empathetic, who understands that stories are sacred gifts.
- The Story Table is more like improvisational theater than it is like a presentation. Pick a moderator who can follow the flow of the conversation and, when necessary, steer the Storytellers back to stories.

FULLER magazine invites you to attend the

STORY TABLE

INTEGRATION :

Stories on faith and transformation

Join us for a simple meal and a powerful evening as we hear stories of how members of our community have been transformed by the integration of psychology and theology.



Communication & Follow-Up

Communication before and after the event is crucial in order for the Story Table to have a lasting impact. Consider hopeful outcomes from the start of planning the Story Table because that will shape communication.

- Inviting the Witnesses:
 - Consider the number of people being invited and what is most convenient: written invitation, e-invite, or e-mail?
 - Consider the formality of the invitation within the context.
 - Does the invitation evoke the theme and feeling of the evening? Do people understand what it is they are attending?
- Following-up with witnesses:
 - The follow-up is a good way to encourage people to reflect on their experience and bear witness within their own spheres of influence
 - Consider inviting the Witnesses to write a response to the evening and share it with you. This is a good way for you to gauge the impact of your Story Table and could also be used to share with others (e.g. online with other Story Table content).
- Following up with Storytellers:
 - Another crucial way to practice hospitality is to express gratitude for the Storytellers. Consider writing a thank you note or extending some other form of gratitude for their courage and vulnerability.
 - Make Storytellers aware of how the content from the Story Table will be used after the fact and make sure to get permission to share their content in whatever form might arise.
- Consider sharing any additional resources with people that might help further engagement around the theme of the Story Table.
- Sharing content: Gather audio, video, photos, quotes, or written transcripts of the evening to expand the breadth of exposure (again, with Storytellers' permission).
 - How can Story Table become a valuable and accessible resource for the wider community?
 - Consider key people of influence that are not in the room with whom it would be helpful to share this memorable event?

FULLER STUDIO INAUGURAL STORYTELLERS



CAMERON LEE
Integration



LUANN PANSELL
Integration



JEREMY CERNERO
Integration



TOMMY GIVENS
Integration



JENNY PAK
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BRAD STRAWN
Integration



SHEILA MUCHEMI
Integration



MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON
Women



MARI CLEMENTS
Women



LISSETH ROJAS-FLORES
Women



MERRITT SAWYER
Women



JULIE KANG
Women



LEAH FORTSON
Women



LIBBIE PATTERSON
Women



CLEMENTINA CHACON
Reconciling Race



MATT HARRIS
Reconciling Race



CALEB CAMPBELL
Reconciling Race



JUDE TIERSMA WATSON
Reconciling Race



STEVE YAMAGUCHI
Reconciling Race



LOVE SECREST
Reconciling Race



JEANELLE AUSTIN
Reconciling Race

“The penalty for failing to listen is to lose history, historical context, and binding values. Without this continuity, any group of people will forget who they are.”

—MAX DEGREE, LONGTIME FULLER SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEMBER