



Telling the story of creation—Lorraine Hartin-Gelardi wove together stories that illustrated the theme of the 2006 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women.

God's Word—Light for the Journey

BY ELLEN BIRKETT MORRIS

Chances are, the messages that have stayed with you the longest in life came in the form of a story. Few stories are more powerful than those rooted in our faith tradition, a truth that was affirmed by participants of the 2006 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, who were treated to the performances of storyteller Lorraine Hartin-Gelardi.

Her storytelling, presented as part of each day's plenary sessions, incorporated the Gathering's theme for the day, including topics such as creation, diversity and economic justice. She took part in plenary planning sessions to be sure that she selected stories with the right mood and message for the day.

"The same story can be used in a variety of settings and speak to various aspects of the human experience," explains Hartin-Gelardi. She is the author of *Wisdom in the Telling: Finding Inspiration and Grace in Traditional Folktales and Myths Retold* (Woodstock, Vt.: Skylight Paths, 2006). She believes that stories work especially well to explore issues of religious faith because stories "express mystery, paradox and opposite ideas, and help release something inside us."

"Stories work because they help you look at things from a whole new point of view," observed Kristy Gustavson of Minneapolis, Minnesota, a three-time Gathering attendee and member of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Mary Perman of Washington, D.C., was so impressed by Hartin-Gelardi that she and a friend offered up thanks for the stories during a morning devotion they shared in their hotel room.

What's in a Story?

Hartin-Gelardi learned the power of the spoken word as a fifth-grader, when snow made outdoor recess impossible. For

an entire month, her teacher read aloud every afternoon from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*. "Our teacher became the characters in those novels. All of us in that classroom were bound together in the common experience of the story. Bits and pieces of ourselves were reflected back to us in Tom and Becky and Huck," she notes.

Stories go beyond entertainment to enlighten and inspire us. "Our deepest feelings are expressed and given voice in our stories. There is an old phrase that goes 'God made people because God loves stories,'" Hartin-Gelardi observes.

She enjoyed positive responses from Gathering attendees, but claims audience members were responding not to her but to the stories themselves. Hartin-Gelardi believes the stories will last in the minds of participants long after her specific words or image has faded away. "Stories stay in our lives and become a lens through which to see our lives. They become a way to help us work through our everyday life."

As the excitement of the Gathering fades and women return to their routines, she urges participants to share all their stories, from their faith traditions and their lives. "We need to remember to share those stories and pass them on," she says.

"Stories have always been important in our lives. We laugh at the antics of the fool, we are moved by the plight of the serving girl, we travel with the hero on his journey and we know that, long ago and far away, others listened to the same stories and also laughed and cried. Their underlying message of spiritual transformation is subtle and significant," says Hartin-Gelardi. 🍷

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