



Forum for
Theological
Exploration



Ego Story/Soul Story Reflection

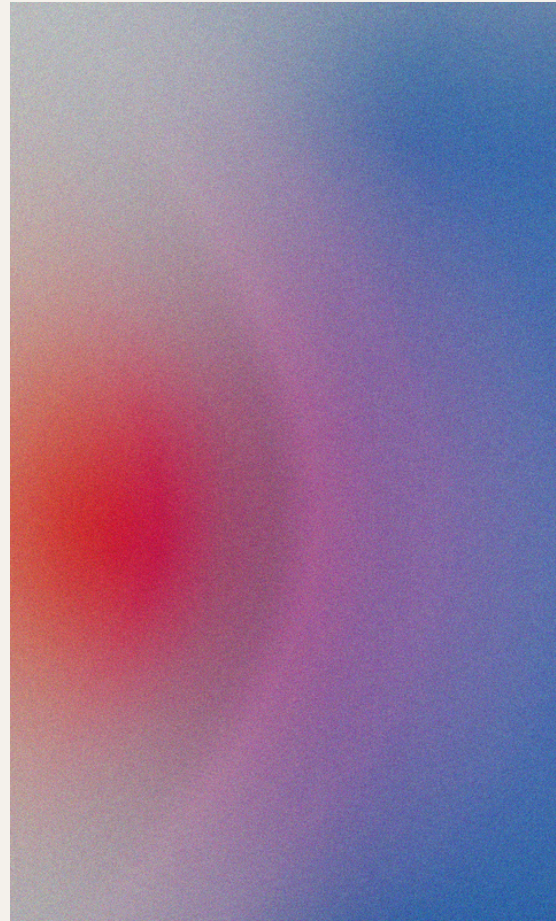
Pres House at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
Ginger Morgan

Part of the UKIRK Launch Series

INVITING STUDENTS TO DISCOVER WHO THEY ARE,
WHO GOD IS,
THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN THEM,
AND HOW THEY ARE CALLED TO SERVE AND LEAD

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Ego Story/Soul Story Reflection

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Basic summary of the program:

Pres House has used the Ego Story/Soul Story Reflection Exercise with groups of students during our annual fall retreat, as part of small groups, and as a key experience for graduating students in our "What's Next?" and "Future Focus" vocational reflection programs. Students need either paper and pen or a laptop in order to journal, as well as the "Ego Story/Soul Story" template that explains the two categories and the journal prompts. We usually introduce the two categories, reading through the descriptions on the template, and then provide students the two writing prompts: one in which they tell their "ego story" of being a student (or about their future plans) and one in which they tell their "soul story" of being a student (or about their future plans). Once everyone has completed the journaling exercise, we place students in pairs or triads to share their two stories, as well as what the experience of doing the reflection was like for them. The exercise is flexible for different and mixed groups of students. For example, students can do this activity at different stages of their student journey (first year students might reflect on their Ego Story/Soul Story with "coming to college" as the context of their reflection; graduating students can reflect in the context of completing their education and their plans for "what's next"; and graduate students can reflect in the context of pursuing their graduate studies. We typically allow an hour to an hour and a half for the exercise and discussion.

Brief description of why the program is designed or organized the way it is:

The activity was first shared with Pres House by Rev. Winton Boyd, a UCC pastor who is a Circles of Trust facilitator with The Center for Courage and Renewal. The exercise is based on the work of Parker J. Palmer in ***A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*** (2009). The activity introduces a framework (Ego Stories/Soul Stories) and balances individual reflection with paired or small group sharing.

What do you hope the students discern, discover, or reflect upon during their participation?

This activity invites students to reflect on a fuller, deeper and truer story of themselves, and then to share it in what Parker Palmer would call a "circle of trust". Trustworthy spaces and people invite honesty and vulnerability. Most social and many interpersonal spaces operate on a more superficial level, where ego stories abound and thrive. By inviting students to tell a more complete truth of their experiences, and allowing an opportunity to be more authentically seen/heard, offering their peers the same in return, this exercise models, practices and embodies being a community of faith (koinonia). Telling our soul stories are exercises in truth telling. They are closely akin to the processes of Christian confession and testimony, and allow the experience of the power and transformation of being witnessed and held in grace by another.

What action(s) do you hope their participation inspires after the program or experience is over in both the short-term and long-term?

We hope students begin to learn to share more authentically and less superficially--in spaces that are trustworthy to do so. We hope they learn to invite and hold others' soul stories with grace and respect. We have found that sharing soul stories deepens connections between students and strengthens the ties in our community. It also models truth telling and appropriate vulnerability. Communities of faith must be intentional about fostering trust and allowing soul stories to thrive, resisting the temptations to remain at the level of ego with one another.

What have you discerned, discovered, seen or reflected upon as you have engaged students in this program/practice?

Students are very familiar with telling their ego stories. They told ego stories to be admitted into college. They tell them at parties and to friends of their parents and on job interviews. Often, they are scared of telling the messier stories of their families, their struggles, and their doubts beyond their closest circle. But, maintaining an ego facade is isolating and tiring. This exercise invites students to share the fuller, truer, and deeper experiences that have shaped them and on which they draw for motivation and purpose. When they are given permission to do so, they are relieved and often feel more free, and powerfully grounded in their story. Sharing those stories with one another has helped students in our programs connect more deeply and authentically with one another, and strengthened our community in turn..

EGO STORIES & SOUL STORIES*
Examining how we show up in our lives...

EGO STORIES

- Are stories told for the sake of self-promotion, like when we apply for a job.
- Focus on life's high spots, when we have been successful and affirmed.
- Try to portray us as in control or in charge of our lives.
- Are often linear stories of continuity and consistency, usually having a resolution.
- Are highly crafted, often leaving out important things; may ignore or falsify information to "spin" the facts in a good light.
- Are always told in prose, sometimes including numbers.
- Are stories that do not sustain us in times of suffering.
- Are stories we tell at a party when someone asks, "what do you do?" or "what are your plans?"

SOUL STORIES

- Are the story "beneath the ego story" with the thread of truth running through it.
- Honor shadow as well as light, suffering as well as gladness.
- Are often stories of twists and turns, when our best laid plans were undone by the unexpected.
- Allow us to integrate the fragments with the whole.
- Are unafraid of change, fear, loss, failure, and shame; or mystery, passion, and ecstasy.
- Are sometimes told in poetry, music or art.
- Are stories that we can hold onto in the hardest of times.
- Are the stories we want the people we love the most to know; the stories we are most likely to be reliving when we are awake at 3 AM or when we die.

*This exercise was shared with Pres House students originally by Rev. Winton Boyd, who is a facilitator for *The Center of Courage and Renewal*. Materials draw on the work of Parker J. Palmer (see *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, 2009).

Individual Reflection

Think about who you are as a person, pursuing an education and eventually a career and life.

Write a paragraph that outlines the 'ego story' of who you are.

Now write a paragraph that outlines the 'soul story' of who you are.