We are giving them Vimeo links to both of your Vibrant Faith MasterClass sessions to watch in advance. None of them have been a part of our online gatherings with you. So, they will experience two hours of your foundation-setting on all of this. What we’d like you to do is this:

**If attachment theory has deep application to our relationship with God, and learning to explore and tell our own story is a crucial step in this process, what does this mean for the church?**

**We’d love for you to focus on the role of story and attachment theory in our relationship with God, and how churches might embrace these dynamics on behalf of the parents in their congregation.**

Let me know if this seems clear to you. And please give me an idea of what you think these tables of people can discuss/process for 20 minutes after your talk…

Outline of Talk

10 minute review of attachment and attachment styles

5 minutes on how attachment affects our relationship with God

15 minutes on how churches can create spaces for story work.

Opening: What I want to talk to you about today is the importance of engaging your story in your family of origin.

I believe that your story in your family growing up has affected your heart and brain more than anything else.

As a result, your story in your family of origin is profoundly affecting the way you currently relate to God… because we all relate to God through our heart and brain.

However, my ultimate goal today is to talk about **how your local church can create spaces and places for people to engage their family of origin stories.**

I suggest that this is core to what it means to follow Jesus and it is necessary to grow in holiness and to practice repentance in a meaningful way.

First, what do I mean when I say “your story in your family of origin”?

When it comes to engaging your story, there’s a sense in which the most significant plot line of your story is your relationship with your parents.

It’s certainly the most influential in terms of setting the trajectory for your life.

Why is this the case? It’s a matter of science. There are two scientific principles. Just like the First and Second Law of Thermodynamics, there is the first and second law of neurobiological development.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Law #1 — *Relationships* influence the brain more than anything else. More than drugs, more than nutrition, more than exercise, more than meditation, more than anything.

Law #2 — Your *earliest life experiences* have a much more significant shaping influence on your brain than your later life experiences. The brain grows at a very rapid speed for the first couple years of your life and then it slows down.

When you put these two laws together, you get the following implication: your earliest relationship with your primary caretakers has had the most shaping power on your brain.

Let me say that again: *Your earliest relationship with your primary caretakers has had the most shaping power on your brain.*

Why is this the case? Because you are created in the image of a *triune* God—a “we” and not an “I.”

Therefore, you are designed for *connection* with others. It’s hard-wired into your very being. Which brings us to the very important topic of attachment.

Let me do a quick review of attachment and attachment styles.

Attachment refers to the manner in which you connect with others. It’s the emotional bond that you develop with the people you are closest to. The people who are there for you, and who truly know you.

If your primary caregivers were attuned, responsive, and engaged with you as a child, you developed what is called a secure attachment.

Secure attachment is an embodied sense of knowing that I *matter* to my primary caregiver, that they *want* to be in relationship with me, and that they will *respond* to my needs. When securely attached children grow up and become adults, they live in a continual state of relational *hopefulness*.

Securely attached adults anticipate that when there is relational rupture—when there is interpersonal conflict—the relationship will be restored.

It's only a matter of time, and it will come about without either me or the other person having to sacrifice our individuality, our perspective.

It’s the realization that I will not have to stuff my feelings in order to be in relationship with you.

I will not be required to sacrifice my individuality. And neither will you.

We both get to have our feelings *and* still be in close, connected relationship. *That's* secure attachment. It is a lovely place to be.

However, sadly, many of us are not securely attached. I’m not.

So let me briefly review the two most common types of insecure attachment.

Avoidantly Attached Adults:

You will feel **more comfortable with emotional distance and separateness from others.**

You will tend to minimize the *importance of interpersonal relationships* and *the communication of emotion.*

*Y*ou will enjoy relationships at times, but **never really *need* others.**

Remember, as a child, you could not turn to others for stimulation or soothing, and so now as an adult, **your nervous system** is not inclined to let you *need* other people.

You tend toward **an auto-regulatory state.**

Your bodies have been trained to not require another human being for interactive regulation—b/c there never was another human being there to regulate you.

And so you like being by yourself. You tend toward **solo activities like being on your phone.**

You will expect other people to handle their own big feelings. Your motto is “**I’ll take care of me, you take care of you.**”

After all, you were ***forced*** to learn to regulate your own big emotions… and so now you expect everyone else to be able to do that as well, especially your romantic partners.

You have decreased access to—and awareness of—your own *emotions*. You tend to focus on **the cerebral and analytical**—rather than the emotional realm.

**Ambivalently Attached Adults:**

You have great difficulty **regulating your big emotions.**

You often *feel* big emotions—intense emotions—and you feel a franticness inside as you struggle to make sense of these emotions and **contain** them.

You are often plagued by a **deep fear that you are going to be rejected or abandoned,** which makes it very difficult to trust anyone.

This leads to habitually seeking closeness to others (which others experience as “**clingy**”).

You are always *watching* for relational disruptions.

You believe that unless your ***dramatically* express their pain,** it is unlikely that the other person will respond.

You almost always feel like you are too “needy.”

**Okay, so how does your attachment style play out in your relationship with God?**

Let’s start with us ambivalently attached folks.

I am indebted to Bonnie Poon Zahl who has written a helpful article on this whole subject titled *Attachment Theory and Your Relationship with God*. Bonnie Poon Zahl.

If you are ambivalently attached, your relationship with God is going to be marked by the following:

You will feel a sense of anxiety and, at times, fear.

You will likely have a history of preoccupation with whether or not God loves you.

You are more likely to be frustrated or angry if you can’t sense God working in your life.

And the whole idea of maintaining a healthy relationship with God will be important to you. You’ll worry about it. And also work at it.

How is my relationship with God right now? Is it strong and close or distant… and why? This will be anxiety producing for you.

Your relationship with God will be marked by a sense of, "God do you see me? And if you do, why won't you respond to me?"

Because, as someone who is ambivalently attached, your brain has been shaped to *anticipate relational disappointment*.

You expect inconsistency. You expect to be dropped. You expect God to not be there for you.

All of the above are really about anxiety over the possibility of abandonment.

Your times of prayer are often going to be more emotional and more fragile than if you were securely attached.

It's this sense of highs with God, where you really feel seen and connected to God, and then periods of just absence where you do not feel God is present at all.

And that inconsistency evokes fear inside, or panic.

It’s the sense of, "I can't count on God. I don't know what my time with God will hold today, because God seems to be unpredictable to me. My experience seems to be marked by unpredictability rather than consistency.”

In contrast, an avoidantly attached Christian will be inclined to have a cerebral relationship with God… and it will be difficult for them to experience warmth and emotional closeness in their relationship with God.

They might be interested in theology, but it is unlikely that they will have a rich, psalmic prayer life where they bring their emotions to God and have an engagement with God that is intimate.

Because intimacy is a function of emotional connection—and an avoidantly attached adult is not very connected to their emotions because it's too painful to be.

And so their relationship with God is going to be more heady, more cerebral.

There won't often be an emotional richness with God.

And therefore they will always feel like something's just not quite right.

Unlike ambivalently attached people, when those of you who are avoidantly attached are in distress, you won’t feel a deep need to establish closeness to God.

You prefer not to depend too much on God.

You expect God to be absent to some degree at any time.

And to protect against the discomfort of God’s sudden absence, you tend to live life “knowing” that you are on your own emotionally.

The best you can do in that setting is to bring your mind to God, to make sense theologically of God’s absence and your orphanhood.

IOW, an avoidantly attached person is going to have a hard time bringing their *heart* to God.

They can bring their mind—reading scripture may come easily to them, reading books about Christianity, Christian life, theology, all of that because it's very cerebral.

But they're going to have a hard time bringing their *desires* to God.

Their *vulnerability*. Their longings.

In other words, an avoidantly attached person has a hard time connecting emotionally with God.

So if you ask an avoidantly attached man, for example, "What are you longing for from God?" they may have a hard time answering that question.

And may even take offense at the question. They might push back saying, "That's not an appropriate question. God is not a vending machine. God’s not here to meet my desires.”

Now, what’s going on here? What's happening inside of them? Why the defensiveness?

The question about what are they desiring from God activated the attachment circuitry in their brain.

Whenever you ask someone about relational longings or desires, you are activating the attachment circuitry in their brain.

And remember them at nine months old, dismissed or rejected every time they have a desire or need.

So they have distanced themself from their relational longings.

As a result, avoidantly attached people have a difficult time emotionally connecting with God.

They are likely to be somewhat puzzled by the pouring out of emotion to God in the Psalms, and wonder why you are calling them to that.

You're inviting them to go to very painful places in their heart by the nature of your question that used the word “longing.”

Now, what about securely attached people?

Securely attached people are able to remain continually connected with God through the highs and lows of life.

Their relationship with God can be warm and emotionally close, but they don’t panic when God feels distant and far away.

Secure attachment to God means low avoidance AND low anxiety with God.

We relate to God the way we learned to relate to our primary caretakers, unless we've done significant work and experienced significant healing.

So, if you are ambivalently attached, your relationships are going to be marked by certain characteristics.

And your relationship with your heavenly father will likewise share these characteristics.

If you are avoidantly attached, your relationship with others is going to be marked by certain characteristics, and your relationship with God is going to be marked by the same characteristics.

This need not discourage anyone. It allows you to put language to what Dan Allender calls your style of relating.

Each of us has a style of relating, and that's why, for those folks who are married, you still have the same fights with your spouse that you were having 10 years ago.

Why are you fighting about the same stuff 10 years later? It’s not because you're dumb.

It's because there are things at play in the depth of your heart that are trying to get worked out. And those things are all related to attachment.

As you think about your relationship with God, have you considered how your attachment style might be affecting how you experience God, how you relate with God on a day to day basis?

There are two types of knowledge about God—doctrinal knowledge and experiential knowledge.

Your experiential knowledge of God—in other words, your sense of what God is like as a Father—this knowledge is deeply influenced by your attachment to your parents.

Haven’t you noticed that there is a disconnect between your doctrinal knowledge of God—in other words, what you cognitively believe God is like—and your experiential knowledge of God—what you *feel* God is like?

Q: Why is there a disconnect?

Because attachment dynamics run down into the deepest parts of us.

Q: Will you allow this reality to prompt you to have compassion for yourself?

Compassion for why it’s so hard for you to believe that God loves you when you fail?

Or compassion for why it’s so hard for you to trust God when you are anxious about some scary circumstance?

I want to transition now to talking about the implications of trauma and attachment science on church ministry.

Given what we know about how trauma and attachment so deeply affect our relationship with God, what should the church be doing differently?

**The number one thing is simply this: the church needs to become a community where people share their stories with one another.**

In order to do that, the church needs to communicate an apologia—a defense—for why engaging your story is both biblical and wise.

I outlined the most common objections to story work in the talks that you were given access to, so I’m not going to restate that here.

The single greatest barrier to story work happening in your local churches is the church leadership. No question. You need to present an apologia to the church leadership as to why this work is biblical, wise, and obedient.

If you want to create a church culture where it people feel free to share their family of origin stories with one another, you have to start with the leaders.

Start by getting the leaders curious about their own stories.

And let me be clear about what I mean by your stories.

I am not talking about a 30,000 foot version of your story where you stay comfortably removed from the painful details.

The invitation to story work is an invitation to name with specificity the ways that you have been harmed by your parents growing up.

And Christian leaders, on the whole, are very suspicious of this endeavor.

In order to name the harm that you’ve experienced, you have to engage ***the particularity of your story*.**

And what I should say is **the particularity of your stories (plural)**… because you have many of them.

Do you have a story? Yes, but it is far truer to say that **you have stories.**

And it is by entering your specific, individual stories of heartache and harm that will allow you to understand how your brain has been shaped by your family of origin.

Q: So, have you written out your stories? Have you written out a story of harm that involves your mother? A story of heartache that involves your father?

Q: And have you written out those stories **on the ground level**… i.e., with details?

Suppose a woman says to you, “I was sexually abused by my step-father. It happened for six years, usually in my bedroom in the morning before he went to work.”

Q: Has she told you a story? Yes and no, but mostly no.

She has told it at 30,000 feet. She has told it in a way that keeps her relatively safe from feeling some very big uncomfortable feelings.

She has not told you **the color of the bedspread** in her bedroom.

She has not told you that they would often do a crossword puzzle together before he abused her.

These are the images she sees in her mind **when she says the simple sentence,** “I was sexually abused by my step-father.”

When we begin to tell a story at the ground level—with details—we begin ***to feel the emotions and bodily sensations we felt in the original scene.***

The key is to visualize the story and write the details.

And then, please hear the next phrase, you need to *linger* with the feelings for a while.

You must linger in death.

To linger in death means to let **the big emotions** associated with particular scenes in your story rise to the surface.

It means to spend time in the moment when you were betrayed by someone who should have protected you and cared for you.

It means to linger with—to sit with—the part of the story **when you felt absolute powerlessness,** and to notice the sensations that that powerlessness evokes in your body.

To linger in death is to sit with painful moments in your story and simply FEEL your feelings—which often means feeling deeply uncomfortable emotions—like **hopelessness, grief, sorrow, and rage.**

And one way you access these feelings is by writing out the *details* of your stories of harm.

Here’s the claim: If you linger in the details of a particular story—and *if you are named well enough in that particular story*—**then grief will emerge.**

**And grief heals the human heart. Grief integrates neural networks in your brain.**

I want to expand your imagination for local churches as places where people are sharing their family of origin stories in small groups.

You may have tried many things to heal and grow.

Perhaps you’ve read lots of good books. Attended conferences. Reread your notes from those conferences. Participated in small group bible studies or church community groups.

Sadly, it’s very possible to read great books, attend helpful conferences, even do therapy with a decent therapist—and still not engage your personal story in depth.

Most books and conferences focus on information transfer. Unfortunately, lots of counseling stops there as well.

Information is not going to heal you; information is not going to catalyze growth and maturation in your heart and brain.

Bible studies are often cognitive experiences.

If you put the people in your small group into fMRI machines while they were having their bible study, the thinking parts of their brains would be lit up but the parts of the brain devoted to emotions, bodily sensations, and autobiographical memory would be largely unactivated.

That is tragic. Why? Because Jesus is interested in your heart, and all church communities—large and small—should likewise prioritize the heart over the head.

To engage your story is to collide with your heart.

1. Do your own story work with a trained guide so that you can learn how to engage the stories of others.
2. Share your How to Write a Story document… or at least teach through the ideas in it. Make sure they understand the difference between overarching life narrative and particular incidents of heartache and harm.

Question for Table Discussion:

1. How can you take initiative in your local church community to create spaces for people to begin to engage their story?
2. What is the biggest obstacle to creating these spaces in your church?

Romans 12:1-2 be transformed by the renewing of your mind = integration

**Venue:**

The Curtis Hotel - 1405 Curtis Street, Denver, CO 80202

Four Square Ballroom, Second Floor

**Speaking Date and Timeslot:**

Thursday, April 27, 8:55 – 9:25 (please arrive a little before our 8:30 start time for this general session, so we can get you mic-ed and ready)

**Responsibilities:**

1. Prepare and present a 30-minute talk, focusing on:

**If attachment theory has deep application to our relationship with God, and learning to explore and tell our own story is a crucial step in this process, what does this mean for the church?**

1. Give Vibrant Faith (Rick Lawrence) a “Table Talk” idea for participants to discuss/process after the talk.

**Stipend:**

$2,100 for leading one, 30-minute talk, and for minor travel expenses.

A major part of our project will include **helping parents learn to tell their childhood story,** based on your insights about the role of storytelling and spiritual formation.

• The session begins at 8:30 with a worship experience I’m leading, then Dr. Nancy Going of our team will be introducing you.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)