

NORTHWEST UNIVERSITY

# Storytelling: Healing and Empowerment for Orphans

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## Introduction

As a social group, orphans are one of the most traumatized and isolated groups among their peers, community and society. There is no need to explain why — the word *orphan* connotes loss and trauma. It also means to feel alone. From the day orphans enter the orphanage, they begin their journey of growing up in a bound space, isolated from the larger community. The spatial confinement imposes social isolation. Social isolation means being powerless and without a voice. The word *orphan* screams for the need of healing and empowerment.

Although the public, in general, expresses compassion and concern for orphans' wellbeing through charity and humanitarian aid, its approach does not foster orphans' healing or empowerment. While charity holds great importance in orphan care and impacts the lives of many, it also carries a connotation of superiority and power. Charity and aid do not give orphans a voice. In fact, they impoverish orphans as they are often used as a decoration for the work of celebrities, politicians and organizations. Furthermore, charity and aid do not foster “transformational development” and do not heal the “marred identity” of the isolated and marginalized groups such as orphans (Myers 194). They do not provide the personal connection that is essential for healing trauma.

There are many ways of healing and empowerment. One of them is a fundamentally human way — storytelling. Sharing stories is a natural human experience. It is a way to connect with others. By telling stories “we feel the most alive” because we are “wired for the story” (Brown “Rising” 6). Our stories not only connect us with other human beings, they also connect our past, our present and our future. Bryant Myers writes that the transformational development is about “seeking a better human future”, and any vision of a better future derives from the stories of our lives (55). Thus, our stories bring meaning to our life and lead to transformation and development.

For the traumatized and marginalized groups such as orphans, storytelling has a special significance. Storytelling is therapeutic; sharing the hurt and brokenness leads to emotional healing through forgiveness and grace (Taylor 133). Holding on to the past intensifies trauma; the process of sharing the past, however, eases the pain and the hurt. Sharing stories is a process of reflection, evaluation and discovery; it restores the spirit and mind, and leads to transformation and healing.

Storytelling has an empowering capacity. It enables one to piece life together and present it as a whole story. Storytelling gives a voice and instills a sense of control and authority and helps to “rise strong” and afresh (Brown “Rising” 50). By giving orphans an opportunity to take charge of their stories, storytelling empowers and restores their brokenness.

In summary, for orphans, storytelling entails multiple assets: a connection to the outside world, a voice, restoration of spirit and transformational development; most importantly, storytelling, for orphans, brings healing from trauma and empowers them to take ownership of their lives.

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Brene Brown, an author and a researcher of human stories, writes, “If we have one or two people in our lives who can sit with us and hold space for our stories, and love us for our strengths and struggles, we are incredibly lucky” (“The Gifts” 47). For orphans, the chances of being “incredibly lucky” are small. Their voices are not heard, their struggles are not shared, and their stories are undiscovered for one reason — a lack of a listener.

In my experience with orphans in Ukraine, I was blessed to be a listener of orphans’ stories and witness the healing and the power of storytelling. This work is a presentation of my findings. It is also my way to honor orphans and empower them by giving them a voice. Bryant

Myers in *Walking with the Poor* states that God, as the main storyteller, “is still writing the story, and [He] has invited us to participate in completion of [his] project” (58). Sharing stories is a part of God’s plan for humanity. Thus, this work is also my participation in God’s work.

This thesis project will be presented in two parts: Part One will present an overview of orphan care in the cultural context in which my fieldwork took place, and the analysis of my findings. Part Two will present the orphans’ voices — their own stories.

## Part One: Overview and Analysis

### Social orphans

The strategies for taking care of orphans vary among cultures and societies. In Sub-Saharan countries, for example, most orphans are cared for by extended family and communities (Wetten et al. 2; Morantz and Heyman 11). In Europe, on the other hand, institutional care is the most common way to care for children without families (Browne et al. 486). A residential institution for children, commonly defined as any congregate care facility in which “round-the-clock professional supervision supplants the role of family” (Berens and Nelson 389). It is a common belief that the children in institutional care are orphans. In reality, however, most children in care are actually *social orphans*, children of living parents. Still, in most places in the world, institutions for children are called *orphanages* for a simple reason: the public response is always more empathetic when the child is portrayed as abandoned or orphaned. It is estimated that, today, over 8 million children are being raised in institutional settings (Berens and Nelson 388). In Africa, for example, up to 88% of children defined by international agencies as orphans have at least one surviving parent (Irvin et al. 12). In European countries, 96% of children in institutional care are social orphans (Berens and Nelson 391). In countries of the former Soviet Union, that account for the majority of all children in institutional care, 80% of children have one or both living parents (Ismayilova et al. 137; Markova 87). As the number of social orphans is the highest in countries of the former Soviet Union, they receive the most attention in research on child institutionalization (Berens and Nelson 389). The phenomenon of massive institutionalization calls for explanation and exploration of its origins and contextual background.

## Cultural Context

The October Revolution of 1917 and the following Civil War brought destitution and destruction to many regions of the former Russian Empire. In the times of social and economic change, children are always affected most. The disorder of war destroyed the existing system of child protection and thousands of children ended up on the streets. The government's response followed with a decision, rooted in ideology that children are better off raised in communal settings, to gather street children into specialized facilities (Lough and Panos 53). Thus, at the dawn of its origins, the Soviet Union government took primary responsibility of taking care of children left without parental care.

This trend continued for decades. However, over time, the ways of caring for state children changed and took different forms. In the seventies, the decision was reached to separate children in institutions by their age, IQ level, behavioral tendencies and social status (Lough and Panos 54). As the government took the biblical role of a "father to the fatherless", in a way, it also openly promoted child abandonment. Families of newborn children with disabilities and special needs were advised to relinquish their parental rights to the state and place children in special institutions for "better" and specialized care (Balachova et al. 28). In public schools, children with behavioral problems and limited intellectual abilities were also referred to the special institutions with a strict discipline and simplified educational program. It is during this time a new term *internat*<sup>1</sup> came into use; it replaced the most common and recognizable name *orphanage*. The new term *internat*, however, carried a different connotation. While orphanage is traditionally associated with abandoned and orphaned children, *internat* carries a social stigma of homeless, difficult, delinquent, retarded or disabled children. When a typical reaction to an

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<sup>1</sup> Large residential settings for children, similar to boarding schools. For the convenience, from this point and on the terms *internat* and *orphanage* will be used interchangeably.

orphan child is pity and compassion, the reaction of people upon an encounter with *internatovtzi*<sup>2</sup> is immediate suspicion and mistrust. The referral to *internat* became a solution for many teachers in public schools who did not want to deal with “difficult” children.

With the beginning of *Perestroika*, a time of social change and transition to a market economy, many families in the former Soviet Union experienced tremendous economic hardship. A major shift in ideology and economy caused great disparities in society. It also impacted the dynamics in families. The crash of the collective ideology, economic instability and uncertain future contributed to high alcohol consumption, drug use, domestic violence and family breakdowns (Markova 86). Typically, in such situations, the children were affected the most. The deformation of family systems and domestic instability led thousands of children to drop out of school, run away from families, and engage in criminal and gang activities (Balachova et al. 29). Thus, in the nineties, at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the situation of children without care resembled the situation of the post-revolution street children seventy years prior.

In Ukraine, where this study took place, in the short period of time from 2000 to 2004, the number of children in institutional care increased by 60% and reached 100,000 (Groza et al. 20). While the number of children in institutional care continued to grow, the governmental funds became scarce and inconsistent. Significant budget cuts negatively impacted living conditions in institutions (Lough and Panos 61). The lack of funds and overcrowding also undermined the quality of care in orphanages. As the conditions and quality of care in orphanages deteriorated and the well-being of thousands of children in state care became a real concern, the Ukrainian government recognized the need to reform institutional care. As part of a child welfare reform initiated in 2006, different types of child placements have developed. Family-home care, foster care and guardianship care became available as an alternative to

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<sup>2</sup> Children reared in *internat*.

institutional placement. Home placements and foster care offered children what they needed most – a family environment, individual attention, care and love. In addition, such placements also offer low cost and the capacity to be self-sufficient (Lough and Panos 61). They also offer children stability, opportunity to learn life skills and integration into society.

The most important change, however, came in the form of redefining the governmental role in the child-rearing practices. The government in Ukraine recognized family as the ideal environment for the abandoned and orphaned children to grow and develop. Today, a new course in orphan care has been set – deinstitutionalization, family strengthening and prevention of social orphanhood.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

However, the solution of deinstitutionalization faces many barriers. In Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union, the social stigma attached to the title of social orphan is still very strong. The idea that children of alcoholics and criminals, children with behavioral problems and mental issues are a problem of the government is still persistent in the minds of many (Prisiazhnaia 25; Markova 92). The systemic exclusion of Soviet ideology contributed to the social stigma and public indifference towards social orphans. Miroslav Volf states that “indifference can be more deadly than hate”, because “if the other is excluded, it is the system doing the excluding, a system in which I participate... and against which I do not rebel because it cannot be changed” (77). Individuals and families that are brave enough to break social stereotypes and welcome children into their families face challenges in finding resources and fighting the bureaucratic system of social services (Nataliya). In addition, oftentimes, foster families are not trained to deal with the complexity of the behavioral issues and psychological needs of orphans (Markova 91). As result, many children experience the trauma of being returned to the orphanage.

Social stigma against children from the *internat* and lack of governmental support and intensify the social isolation of children upon leaving the orphanage. After leaving the system, youth from the orphanage maintain social ties primarily with their own kind — social orphans. Their social status of orphans, or *internatovtsi*, stays with them for the rest of their lives (Astoians 27). This “otherness” sets orphans apart from the rest of society, makes them invisible and voiceless. Lack of support and social isolation intensify the orphans’ experiences of trauma, neglect and abuse. Healing from trauma is a long process; it cannot be achieved independently. Although it requires individual’s effort and courage, more than that, healing requires the support of others – community, peers and caregivers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Storytelling as Healing**

There are many books written and studies done on the healing and empowering effects of storytelling. Daniel Taylor, the author of *The Healing Power of Stories*, states that when our life seems broken, meaningless and plotless, the best way to heal is to tell a story (113). One of the healing aspects of storytelling is that storytelling implies community. Whether it is a community of only two, a storyteller and a listener, or many, it is a healing experience because it brings people together. Thus, storytelling is reciprocal; it requires both a listener and a teller, something to give and something to be given (115).

Storytelling helps orphans to process their experiences of trauma. Many children in the orphanage experienced a variety of trauma, from witnessing domestic abuse and violence, to parental alcoholism and neglect. Sharing burdens and shame with others can be an emancipating and healing experience for children. Narrating their stories gives orphans an opportunity to start a dialog about their experiences and disclose their strategies of dealing with them (Overlein 157). Moreover, an experience of narrating personal story also contributes to construction of identity

and strengthening resilience skills (Overlein 163). It also helps orphans to evaluate their experiences and find meaning to them. Voicing their experiences of trauma can bring children closer, help them to connect and heal their emotional wounds.

Storytelling is especially healing for the trauma victims. Trauma in an orphans' life is a common experience; still, sharing stories of trauma is painful and difficult. Children that experienced parental loss, abuse or neglect are often reluctant to share their stories because they evoke suffering, shame and pain. Boris Cyrulnik points out that there are different ways of sharing trauma (37). While sharing trauma with others, some tend to relive an event by fixating on facts and details; others take a more creative approach by splitting from the wounded self and narrating trauma lightheartedly, "with merriment" (38). As the author points out, this way of narrating the story brings healing and sets in motion resilience (38).

### **Storytelling as Empowerment**

Brene Brown in *Rising Strong* states that our stories have power: by denying them we give them the power to define us, but when we share our stories, we take the ownership over them (50). There are many studies and stories about orphans - their experiences, their needs, and their wishes. However, most of them are written, defined and interpreted by others, not the orphans. Orphans' voices are silenced. Storytelling for orphans is an empowering experience; it instills a sense of control and authority over their stories, their life. It gives them a chance to write their own ending and control their life course.

Several studies on adolescents and children show that storytelling activities lead to increase of self-worth and self-efficacy and formation of identity (Nelson and Arthur 179; Mohammadi et al. 70; Knoetze 467). Other studies point out that storytelling leads to self-reflection, understanding one's own feelings, developing positive coping skills and resilience (East et al. 23; Flaherty 190). Storytelling also helps to make sense of past experiences. Without

a voice, the past remains as a silent memory. Sharing stories, however, makes the past come alive and brings meaning to it. Making sense of the past helps shape the future (Allender 2). A process of narrating the past not only evokes memories, but also prompts interpretation of events which builds self-reflection skills and deeper thinking (Thorne et al. 516). Storytelling offers an opportunity for orphans to re-evaluate their past, view it from a perspective of experience, discover something positive and cherish it.

### **Storytelling as a Discovery**

Lastly, storytelling also holds great value for researchers and caregivers. The everyday life of children in institutional care is largely unexplored by researchers. Storytelling offers access to the insights of orphanhood as a phenomenon. Personal stories allow practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of orphans' experiences. Also, they can lead to new discoveries.

My recent fieldwork experience in Ukraine of collecting the stories of orphans has led me to new discoveries about orphans' experiences and perspectives. I learned about life in institutional care, its bad and good sides. I discovered that life in an orphanage can be happy and life with parents can be a nightmare. I learned about the shame children feel of having alcoholic parents, yet, at the same time I discovered that they long to be reunited with them, cared for and loved. I learned about the injustices and abuse of caregivers and the system. I also discovered the opposite — stories of amazing caregivers' dedication and selfless love that make a lasting impact in orphans' lives. I discovered that in the orphanage a child actually finds family, community and support, as the hurt of being abandoned or neglected is easier to bear in a community of the "alike" than in a family of strangers. Most importantly, I learned about the tremendous need of orphans to share their story; the need to be noticed and to be heard.

### **Fieldwork and Participants**

Initially, my fieldwork focused on the youth who graduated from orphanages; their experiences, challenges and the struggles they go through after leaving the system. As I began collecting data, however, my focus changed. While meeting with the graduates, I discovered that the problems of independent life are actually the last thing orphans are willing to talk about. Surprisingly, however, most of them were eager to share their own story; the memories of their childhood, family relationships, and life in the orphanage. Thus, my initial research on the problems that youth from orphanages encounter turned into a collection of their life stories. My research also expanded to a collection of stories of children in the orphanage, as well as caregivers and practitioners who are directly involved in the work with orphans. The names in the stories are authentic with the exception of a few participants that expressed a wish to alter their names. To ensure participants' privacy, the places in which the meetings took place and the orphanages they lived in are not mentioned.

The youth I reconnected with during my fieldwork is from three orphanages. Two of the orphanages are located in the same village in the South of Ukraine. The village, a former colony of Jewish settlers, has a sad history. In its heyday the Jewish community grew strong and was prosperous. Amidst its residents, however, there also lived the less fortunate — orphans. The village community fully financed and supported the orphanage. Since its establishment two hundred years ago, the community experienced, but withstood, adversity and misfortune. In 1941, during the German occupation, the community experienced a final blow — a massacre of all Jewish residents. Ever since then, the community has not been the same and the remaining villagers live believing that their village is cursed and forsaken by God. During my visits with orphans, this feeling of doom and helplessness has always been present in the orphanages and expressed in orphans' stories. Moreover, one of the orphanages is built on the grounds of a

destroyed synagogue. Thus, in addition to personal trauma, a communal tragedy is always been present in the life of my participants.

The number of participants in my research adds up to over thirty orphans. Their age range varies from 14 to 25 years, with approximately an equal number of male and female participants. With fifteen participants I was able to set up individual and group interviews; with others, I spent hours in personal conversations. The interview meetings were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Although, the necessary effort was put into preserving the essence of orphans' stories, it should be noted that, to some extent, that translation has altered the originality of the participants' words, order of thought and construction of stories.

## **The Analysis and Discussion**

### **Small stories**

Orphans' stories differ from typical life narratives. The construction of a narrative includes careful selection of an episode, a life-changing experience, or a series of events that are "tellable and attention-grabbing" (Bamberg 368). It also includes a narrator's reflection, the experience and a vision for the future. Thus, a narrative gives an impression of the storyteller as a "fuller and rounder" person (Bamberg 368).

The orphans' stories are different. They are *small stories* – stories that are told through interaction, in an everyday setting; stories that are not necessarily recognized as stories; stories that seem to pop up randomly and are quickly forgotten (Bamberg "Biographic" 63). Orphans' stories are sad, broken and inconsistent. They often have no beginning or ending; they are told randomly, in bits and pieces, and every so often make no sense. Some stories are conveyed with intense emotion; others are told with no feelings at all. Some are their true experiences; others are mixed with fantasies and imagination.

To the contrary of big stories — life narratives, skillfully guided by the interviewer into a specific direction, — *small stories* are often the allusions, deferrals, or even refusals to tell (Georgakopolou 1). The value of *small stories* is largely neglected; however, they are “the bread and the butter” of narrative studies (Bamberg 63). In fact, for the researchers, *small stories* are even more important as they tend to be spontaneous and provide an emotional state of the story teller, the level of trust he or she has towards the listener, and the personal significance of the story. As earlier stated, *small stories* are not only an activity of sharing and exchanging information or experiences, but the refusal to tell or the deferral to share are equally significant pieces of the small story (Georgakopolou 5). *Small stories*, or small talks, are especially typical for children in an orphanage who experienced trauma in their lives. Traumatic experiences affect children differently; some children feel the urge to talk and verbalize their experiences, and others shut down internally refusing to share their trauma.

Maria, for example, at the age of six, witnessed an episode of domestic violence that led to the death of both of her parents. Her reaction to the trauma was to share this episode in detail and multiple times with anyone available to listen to her story. Not only did she share this episode, she also tended to verbalize and comment upon what she was experiencing at any given moment. Her talkativeness often provoked harassment by others in the orphanage which contributed to her social isolation and loneliness. However, whenever she tried to keep her thoughts to herself, her anxiety level would increase dramatically. Her *small stories* were her refuge from her anxieties, her “here and now” experiences.

Alina’s refusal to share, on the other hand, is also her *small story*. Alina was separated from her mother and siblings at an early age. Besides the trauma of separation, she also experienced the trauma of rejection by two foster families, which resulted in her return to the

orphanage. In everyday life she is very social and active; however, every time the topic of mother or family comes up, she would freeze emotionally and refuse to talk. Her silence, however, also tells a story. It tells a story of unresolved trauma, betrayal and hurt. Her story, as Pryer explains, is left hanging; a story that is too shameful or sad to share, and is “incommensurable” with the common stories-narratives (2). The hanging stories, the untold or not spoken about, are always felt, and present in conversations with orphans.

### **Therapy**

Storytelling as therapy is not a new technique; its implementation as a successful intervention has been applied and used in many forms and in different settings. Stiles and Kotman, for example, in their study used mutual storytelling as an intervention for depressed and suicidal children. They present storytelling as play therapy when the child is given a task to construct an ending to a given story. The story can be repeated and reconstructed many times and in many ways, which gives a child an opportunity to change the story and express their own feelings in different ways. It also gives a window to add their personal experiences, apply humor and be creative. Suicidal tendencies, depression and self-mutilation are common occurrences among orphans. Storytelling gives orphans a chance to share their trauma indirectly, by creating a story and speaking about their experiences metaphorically. It also invites them to a communal activity of sharing and exchanging experiences, the example of which is presented in a following story.

During one of my visits to the orphanage, a Christian youth group also came to organize a summer camp for the orphans. The camp was a huge success; the children, the caregivers, even neighboring families, were all excited, inspired and grateful for a wonderful time. The next day after the youth left, however, a feeling of sadness and gloom filled the orphanage. I understood why — times like this, engaging, dynamic and happy are rare in the orphanage. I sat with a

group of boys, trying to keep a conversation flowing. One of them, Stephan, had his arm wrapped in a cloth. Immediately, I knew what it meant — a new cutting. As our conversation continued, Stephan shared his reasons for cutting his arm. “It is not fair. We just got used to them [the youth], we just learned to open up to them, and they left.” Lacking words to express his feelings, or perhaps not having someone to talk to, he expressed his despair through cutting. The seventeen cuts on his arm represented seventeen young people that touched his life. Stephan’s story was an ice-breaker. It inspired the other boys to share their feelings, their stories, and their reasons for cutting. Sharing stories was therapeutic for the boys; they were able to find something positive, even something to laugh about. Also, they were able to analyze and make sense of their experiences. This episode of sharing stories about their feelings was not an ordinary occurrence; it came spontaneously and unexpectedly. However, if the culture in the orphanage would be more inviting for sharing the feelings and discussing them openly with others, self-destructive behaviors in the orphanage could be avoided and minimized.

### **Healing**

A *mother* is a common theme in orphans’ stories. It is also a topic that causes distress, anxiety and pain; not only because of her absence, but mostly because of a cultural bias against mothers of social orphans. In Ukrainian culture, a mother holds a special place. The image of a mother is a sacred subject in literature, poetry and songs. A mother always sacrifices herself for the sake of her children, always places the children’s needs first, always cares and protects; a mother is always there. The cultural pedestal for a mother is high, and when a mother neglects her children, abandons, or worse, loses custody to state care, societal judgment towards her is harsh. A woman that falls short on the scale of being a good mother becomes an outcast of society, community and family. The majority of children in orphanages are the children of failed

mothers — single mothers, mothers with alcohol dependency or mental health issues. Their children also share the stigma of a mother-failure which silences and shames them.

Dima, for example, when we first met, told me “I don’t have a mother”, implying he was an orphan. I, however, felt that there was more to that story. He kept his story with him all his years of growing up because he felt shame about his run-away alcoholic mother. Because of the cultural prejudice against mothers like Dima’s, he could not share his story. Only when Dima matured enough and felt strong, could he express his pain and hurt. There are many examples like this in the orphans’ stories. Although their longing for a mother is strong and never goes away, the cultural environment forces them to suppress their feelings, their wishes, and their stories. As Hofstede writes, “The sources of one’s mental program lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experience” (5). While in the orphanage, orphans are under the influence of its mental environment — harsh and judging. Sharing stories can create a different culture — a culture of acceptance and forgiveness. Sharing stories about mothers can help orphans to express their true feelings, instill hope, bring closure, and improve relationships with their mothers.

Nadya, for example, while living in the orphanage, in the presence of others, expressed bitterness and anger towards her mother: “We had a good life until my father died and mother started drinking. I was six when mother brought me and my brother to the orphanage. She told us “I will be back on Sunday”, so we waited every Sunday for her. We would go to the street corner to look for her every Sunday, but she never came.” In private, however, she shared with me a different story — her dream of finding her mother: “I just want to see her face, because I don’t remember it anymore.” After she left the orphanage, she found her; their reunion was not happy, however. The mother did not recognize her daughter and did not want to talk to her. Although

Nadya felt traumatized and deeply hurt by this experience, still, she kept in touch with her mother, assisting her in any way she could. “She is still my mother.” She repeated this phrase many times during our conversations. During my fieldwork, I could not meet with Nadya. I met with her mentor and a spiritual mother, who shared with me a story about Nadya’s recent reunion with her mother. As Nadya, concerned by the pitiful condition of her alcoholic mother, packed bags of warm clothing and food for her, Nadezhda, her friend, sat in the corner and cried. “I have never seen anything like this in my life”, she told me. “It is a mother’s role to give and to care; but here the role was reversed – a child, once neglected and abandoned by mother, was taking care of a broken, alcoholic woman; yet, still her mother.”

Nadya’s story is a story of many orphans longing to reconnect with their families. Social stigma and the judgmental culture silence orphans’ voices, forcing them to suppress their feelings. Although sharing stories about a mother always brings sadness, it is also a healing experience; it helps orphans express their feelings and release their anxiety of unspoken, hanging stories. Many of them, Andriy, for example, never had a chance to share their memories and stories: “I never talked to anyone about my parents. I kept it all inside.”<sup>3</sup> These unspoken memories caused him tremendous stress and frequent emotional outbursts. Because of his behavioral issues, he did not have close friends and experienced his pain alone. During the interview, while talking about his mother and family, he took his time to carefully choose every word, emphasizing the significance of the topic. Sharing his story was a healing experience for Andriy; by expressing his thoughts and feelings, storytelling helped him to release his anxiety and grief over the loss of his mother.

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<sup>3</sup> More about Andriy in Part Two.

**Empowerment**

Storytelling is transforming and empowering; I witnessed this myself after sharing a couple of hours with the four runaway boys — broken spirited, humiliated, and shamed. Upon capturing them, the authorities, as a way of cruel punishment, intentionally chopped off their hair in the way that made the boys look incredibly ugly and vulnerable. When I approached them, they asked if I could fix their hair. Unfortunately, I could not. Other children warned me that the orphanage director forbade anyone touching the boys' hair: "this is their punishment", they explained. As an outsider, I could not go against the orphanage administration. My involvement with the children in many ways depended on my good relationship with the orphanage director. All I could do was to offer my empathy. I sat with them and asked to share their story. They told me the typical story of a boring life in the orphanage and a love for an adventure. The details of their venture were fascinating. As they spoke, other kids came forward. The audience grew, and the boys became more talkative; their story became humorous and more adventurous. They made funny comments on each other; they took scissors and made their hair look even uglier. At the end, everyone was laughing. I was amazed: the broken and humiliated teenagers completely took charge of their situation; they turned it around; they owned it. As they spoke, I realized that sharing their story, not fixing their hair, was what they needed at that time. As Cyrulnik writes, sharing the traumatic experience, humiliation in this case, can be done with "merriment" — laughter and fun (38). By sharing their story, the boys were able to get their dignity back and regain their confidence. Storytelling brought the rebirth of their spirit and empowerment.

**Envisioning the Future.**

The *future* is another common theme in orphans' stories. Envisioning the future, orphans see themselves as capable and able to provide, to care, and to raise a family. Their thinking is positive and hopeful. While sharing their dreams, orphans have their own, happy version of

future; they see themselves whole and strong. A wish to share their vision of the future was expressed by all of the orphans I interviewed. During the interview with Andriy, for example, our conversation turned to a sensitive topic – parents and siblings. I noticed that it was hard for Andriy to talk about this topic and I tried to end the interview. To my surprise, he insisted on continuing. “We talked about everything”, he said, “but I wish you asked me about my future. You know, I have a plan for my future.”

Demko, another interviewee, also shared his big dreams about the future. “My dream for the future is to start my own business and to have a family. But my biggest dream is to clean my documents and completely wipe out any records indicating that I ever lived in an orphanage. I don’t want my children to know about this part of my life.” I was surprised to hear such statement from Demko. During the interview, he was incredibly open about his life and experiences. When I asked him if he would like to be identified under a different name, however, he replied: “I don’t want a pseudo name. I am not ashamed of my life.” It was okay for him to be vulnerable with me, a stranger. For his future family, however, he wanted to appear as whole and strong — a person without shameful past.

As Brene Brown puts it, “when we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write the ending” (Brown 50). In sharing their stories, the *future* stories in particular, orphans are taking ownership and writing the ending of their life stories. Although Andriy knew that the chances for him to realize his dreams are not good, still, he wanted to show his own version of his future; he wanted to own it. Similarly Demko, he did not want to be defined by his social status of an orphan — helpless and vulnerable; he wanted to take charge of his life story and present it for his future family the way he envisioned it.

The ability to envision the future differently makes us capable of being different (Taylor 127). It inspires us to work hard, to strive and to achieve. Sharing their stories helps orphans to reflect on the past, envision the future, and make sense of their life. Doing so builds orphans' resilience and helps them take ownership of their stories, which in turn brings orphans empowerment and instills a sense of control of their future.

### **Implications**

Based on the analysis of my fieldwork findings, I conclude that in the orphanage setting sharing stories is extremely helpful for orphans. Any orphanage in Ukraine is a place full of stories that need to be shared and young lives that need healing and empowerment. Although privately, orphans share their stories, the general culture in the orphanage does not promote story-sharing. There is a great need of building a more inviting environment in the orphanage. Changing the orphanage culture, or as Groody writes, "reordering the hearts of people," is a first step that needs to be taken in implementing storytelling in the orphanage (29). Changing the orphanage's unwritten culture, however, is a long and slow process. Most staff, in any Ukrainian orphanage, consists of people who dedicated many years of their life to caring for orphans. Their method of caring for orphans is influenced by the highly structured governmental pedagogical system which limits creativity and novelty. However, even in the midst of the highly structured institutionalized care, there is always a way to implement something new. In the Ukrainian context, I see the church taking a leadership role in implementing storytelling in the orphanage. The current government of Ukraine, to certain extent, allows and encourages the church and faith-based organizations to be actively involved in the orphanages. Thus, in many orphanages in Ukraine a presence of Christian volunteers or lecturers on spiritual development is a normal occurrence. However, their work mainly involves teaching Christian ethics classes, which resemble a typical classroom lecture with limited interaction between the lecturer and the

listener. While the orphanage staff is limited by governmental restrictions, the Christian volunteers can be more creative and flexible in their work with orphans. Instead of the lecture type approach, they can implement a more informal, conversational method. The same life lessons presented as a story, not a lecture, have more chances to be internalized by orphans and applied in real life situations. Conversation, or storytelling, changes the dynamic in the classroom and creates a different environment – it invites orphans to equal participation. It also builds trust and strengthens interpersonal relationships.

Although orphans do share their stories, most often the storytelling takes place outside the orphanage, during the times when they are permitted to leave the campus. An opportunity to leaving the campus, or be invited to the caregivers' home, however, is not for all orphans — it is a privilege that must be earned. For the challenged kids like Andriy, or the “cool” ones like Demko, an opportunity to share their stories and to be heard is limited. For Andriy, an interview was a first time chance to open up about his parents and feelings in general. For Demko, one of the leaders among the orphans, my invitation was a first time chance to visit a private home outside the orphanage. Most importantly, it was a chance for him to unload his personal feelings about experiencing life alone, without family or parents. In the orphanage, in order to be respected by others, he had to wear a mask of being “tough and cool”; in private, however, he opened up and shared his feelings. An opportunity to express their feelings and share their stories, however, should not be limited to the privileged or selected orphans. There should be a safe place for orphans' stories in their everyday environment. The orphanage staff and the Christian mentors should recognize the need of orphans to share their stories and create the environment that would promote storytelling. A story-based spirituality class is one of the ways to start building an inviting environment for orphans to share their stories. As evident from the

orphans' stories, sharing hurt brings healing. However, only in an environment of acceptance and trust can the healing process begin.

Storytelling is not always about sharing stories; it is also a creative process. In the orphanage, storytelling can be applied as a story-making group activity. A collective creation of a story is not a new technique; it is a known therapeutic method for children and youth with behavioral problems and affective disorders (Knoetze 461; Stiles and Kottman 338). In the orphanage, story-making can be especially useful and practical. It can be practiced and applied as an extracurricular activity. Compulsory extracurricular activities take place in any orphanage in Ukraine, these activities, however, often do not meet orphans' interest or needs. A story, on the other hand, is something that all orphans are interested in. Co-creating the story offers orphans a chance to become authors, to take charge of the story's course. Through the story-making activity, orphans can learn to connect and sympathize with others. Thus, story-making becomes a method of social bonding and community building. An activity of making a story also breaks barriers, invites to participation and sparks imagination and creativity. Creativity builds confidence and resilience. As Kelley and Kelley state, "...confidence is like a muscle – it can be strengthened and nurtured" (2). By strengthening the orphans' confidence, creative storytelling can lead to orphans' empowerment and personal growth. Most importantly, the skills learned while creating a story will be transfer into personal storytelling, enabling orphans to transform their *small stories* into beautiful and powerful *narratives*, empowering them with abilities to present themselves as "fuller and rounder", a strong person (Bamberg 368).

Storytelling can also be applied as a qualitative research method for studies on orphans. In research literature, while the concerns about the orphans' wellbeing are addressed and well-studied, most studies lack the orphans' voices. Although the orphans are in the heart of many

studies, their life experiences and needs are typically described by the outsiders, not the actual actors (Jacobsen 217; Vashchenko et al. 573; Morantz and Heymann 11). For the researchers, storytelling offers a deeper, individual understanding of the orphans' experiences, their needs and emotions; elements that quantitative research method lacks. For the orphans, storytelling as a research method means being recognized, acknowledged and heard. It invites them to a direct participation and gives them authority to become the authors of their own life. Storytelling as a research method invites orphans to a direct participation, which in itself is an empowering experience.

In the orphanage, storytelling can be applied in different ways. Storytelling is a powerful technique that extends beyond my personal expertise as a researcher. However, even with my limited capability, the research studies, my preliminary findings, and orphans' stories show strong evidence of the healing and empowerment of storytelling.

**Part Two: Orphans' voices****Oksana's story**

It is four years since I left the orphanage and sixteen years since I became an orphan. I was five when that happened. My mother was nine months pregnant; her water broke and she was in labor. I was scared and did not know what to do. She handled me my eighteen months baby sister and told to run away to our neighbors. As she kept screaming for help, my father, who was drunk, hit her. He underestimated his strength and they both died – my mother and a baby brother. She was almost my age when she died. I have a clear memory about that day, just as if it happened now. I remember the funeral. I was standing there; everyone was crying, but I couldn't. I understood it was wrong, but I just couldn't cry. Later in court during the sentencing, I remember laughing at father, saying "you deserve it." But when he walked out of the courtroom, I realized I would never see him again and I started crying. No one could make me stop crying then; I was inconsolable. So, this is my story; this is how I became an orphan.

Sergiy, my brother, and I were in different orphanages at first. We were separated and did not see each other for nine years. I was fourteen when we met again. I was walking on the campus when one of the caregivers called me saying "Go, pack up your things. You are going to see your brother." At that moment I felt emotions I cannot describe. Ever since first grade, when I learned that my brother was well and in a different orphanage, I wanted to be with him. I knew I had a young sister, but I did not long for her. I did not remember her face and my heart was empty toward her. But my brother, I remembered him well. I had a picture of him when he was a baby and every evening I would come to the window and pray: "God, please let it happen, please let me see my brother." The girls in my room always made fun of me for that, but I kept praying. So, when I heard I was going to see him, I was overwhelmed with feelings.

When we finally met, he did not recognize me first. There were two of us in the room, me and Tanya, another girl. Her little brother stood beside her, holding onto her leg. When Sergiy walked in, the caregivers asked him “do you recognize your sister?” He stood for some time staring at me and Tanya, then suddenly ran from the room. It took a while for the kids to find him. In that first moment, I think he just got scared. He did not expect to see me and when they told him to choose a sister, he just panicked. I recognized him right away though, I remembered him by heart. When they brought him back, we sat in a private room and had a good conversation. Later, in the orphanage, we had a hard time getting along. He would call me names and I would beat him up every time. It was an interesting relationship. But when we just met, the first question he asked was about our father, if I knew anything about him.

I saw my father after what happened a couple of times: first in the courtroom then in the orphanage. After being in prison for some time, he came to see me one day. He was ill and was released from the prison. When they told me my father was asking for me, I said, “I don’t want to see him.” But the kids kept telling me “look through the window at least,” but I wouldn’t even do that. I was shaking, and even though I wanted to see him, I would not look at him. So he left without seeing me. Even though we did not see each other, I knew he wanted me; he came to see me. My brother, on the other hand, he never saw our father after the incident but he always wanted to see him. As for me, I still don’t want to see him. Not because he has a different family now and has moved on, but because my feelings towards him are gone. I don’t know the word “dad” and don’t know what a father’s love is. I still carry that hurt in my heart. I always feel and expect that everyone wants to hurt me and everyone who comes into my life will betray me. The closer I get to someone, the more intense that feeling is. I am easy with people, but I don’t share

a lot about myself. Some people ask “Why do you never share anything? Why don’t you open your heart to others?” Because no one would listen to my story.

People are the biggest disappointment in my life. I have been betrayed many times, so my first reaction is to protect myself. When I left the orphanage and came to this school, I made a lot of friends here. Many of them did not know my past. When my girlfriend recently told me, “I would never guess you are from an orphanage,” I felt very good about myself. It feels nice to be recognized as normal. I worked hard to create that image, to fit in with normal families.

As an orphan, I was eligible for adoption. There was a family that wanted to adopt me, but I did not want it. Because I knew, if I went to live in another family, I would never call the parents mom and dad. There are no other parents for me.

In the future, I imagined myself as a social worker. I wanted to work with orphans. However, it did not work out. Now, I think I cannot work with orphan children; I get upset easily; I take everything too close to my heart. I get emotional and cry a lot, and that is not good for children. Children, they feel everything. So, I don’t think I can be a social worker.

If I could change anything about the past, I would change myself. I would want to be a stronger person and care less about what others have to say. For those who are still in the orphanage I would like to say: be strong. No matter what, be strong. Do not fall, but even if you do fall, remember it is not the end of life. Get up, shake off the dirt and move on. There is no one to lift you up; it is your own responsibility. Everything will be ok if you put enough effort into it.

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My conversation with Oksana started on a sad note – a topic of betrayal, mistrust and hurt. I understood why – a few days before our conversation she had broken up with her long-time boyfriend from the orphanage and kicked out her brother, who took her boyfriend’s side,

from the house. Thus, I understood where the bitterness and resentment was coming from. As our conversation continued, however, her demeanor changed. Her tone of voice became slow and gentle. She often paused to choose the right words. Her stories and memories became more positive. In the end, when we hugged, saying goodbye, she said, "I feel much better now. After opening up about my life, I feel lighthearted again." A few days later, she reconciled with her brother Sergiy. Daniel Taylor writes that storytelling leads to action (127). In Oksana's case sharing her story was not only a healing experience; it also led her to a graceful act of forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **Andriy's Story**

I was taken from home because my parents were drinking. I don't remember much about that day, but I do remember that it was on my father's birthday. I also remember my mother crying; she did not want them<sup>4</sup> to take us away. At first, I lived in the Children's Home for three years, then I came to live in this orphanage. It's been ten years now. I like it here. Here I feel like I'm home; I feel comfortable and safe. I like the discipline here, it holds us together. The orphanage provides us with food and shelter; it keeps us clean and comfortable. I think all children should be grateful for the orphanage. The caregivers are nice here too; not all, but there are nice people here. Valentina N, for example, she is always available to talk. She is the only one I talk to when I am in a bad mood. She understands me. I am not an easy person; I have a lot of shortcomings. I get upset very easy, especially when caregivers have something against me. I argue with them or just run away from campus. After a while I usually come back with my head down and apologize. It is not easy for me to apologize, but when I do, I always feel better because I found strength in myself to do that and I know I am forgiven. After that, I am usually on my best behavior, for two days at least.

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<sup>4</sup> He refers here to social services.

I know I can be difficult, but I can also be a nice person. I like little children and I like to help people. There is one old lady housekeeper here whom I always help. I am very proud of that, of some of my good behaviors. I know I can be patient and nice.

My regrets... I regret some of my behavior in the past. I wasn't very obedient; I didn't behave badly on purpose, but I did. I realize I could be a good influence for younger children, but I taught them a lot of bad things. I am very sorry about that.

I never wanted to live in another family or to be adopted. I am used to the kids and everyone here; I never wanted to leave them. Even when I was hurt or mistreated by others, I never wanted to leave the orphanage. I kept telling myself "It will pass, I can handle it." I don't envy those who got adopted... I miss my family. I never talked to other kids about my parents, I kept it all inside. I only spoke once with our director about them; I told her all I remembered about them and she shared what she knew.

When I was in fifth grade, I learned that my mother had passed away. She never visited me here. Last time I saw her I was five. I don't know where my father is or if he is still alive, but I would love to find him. I would love to see him again; I would hug my father and tell him how much I miss him. I have a sister and brothers, but I don't know much about them. My brother Alex, he is not a brother to me anymore — he has never called or visited me since he left this orphanage. I do have another brother, Artem. He has disabilities and lives in a special institution. My dream is to find him. I want to take him to live with me when I graduate and will be on my own.

I think I am ready to start a new life, I am ready to graduate. I think I can manage my independent life, but I do have my fears too. My biggest fear is to get involved in drug-related activities. I don't think I will be drinking. I already tried alcohol and did not like it, but I am

really worried about getting into drugs, get influenced by others. I also worry that I will not be able to continue my education. I worry that I would not be able to make new friends or keep relationships. It will be difficult for me to get used to new people. I would have to prove myself, show my strengths.

I don't plan on getting into a relationship or starting a family after the orphanage, but when I have children I will tell them everything about my life here. I want them to know about my experiences and to learn from them. But I will try hard, and I will do everything I can – to get an education and have a good job, to make sure they will never experience living in an orphanage.

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I have known Andriy, for years, as the most challenging kid in the orphanage with severe emotional reactions to anything that could upset him. Because of his temperament, he did not have many friends; he had no one to talk to about his pains and hurts, and most of his free time he spent outside the orphanage prowling the neighborhood, looking for trouble. After I interviewed several teenagers from the orphanage, Andriy approached me and asked for an interview. I was happy to do so; I knew this was his chance to be heard and to be acknowledged. I did not know how he felt about being interviewed until recently. However, I knew that experience of sharing his story had changed him — he walked on campus with confidence, holding his head high and smiling. In my recent follow-up interview he opened up about his experience of sharing his story: “I felt good; I felt I was important. In the orphanage other kids kept asking me about the interview, but I would not tell them anything. It felt good to have a secret and be special.” The experience of being interviewed, being singled out and being selected, empowered him and gave him a voice.

### **Marina's story**

I came to live in the orphanage when I was twelve. Before, I lived on the streets and stayed in some strange places. I had some homeless kids as friends; they taught me a few things and I stayed with them. I liked the life on the streets. I liked its freedom. I liked begging. I didn't feel shame at all. I felt that people had to give me money.

When I was twelve, I was brought to the orphanage. But soon, I ran away. Why? A habit. I did not like it there. It was too crowded. I was a new girl there and did not get close with any kids yet, so I ran away. There were four of us. We walked out from the orphanage in the broad daylight. First, we walked towards the river, crossed the bridge and ran as long as we could. Then we walked through woods and sunflower fields. We ended up in a village and slept on a haystack. The next day we asked for some food and continued to walk following the rail road tracks until we reached a town. We did not know that we ended up in the wrong town. In this town we spent a night in the apartment basement, and next day we got on the bus. I told the driver a story about a sick grandma and he took us in. That is how we got to the city.

In the city I knew everything; it was familiar territory. The first thing I did was I brought my friends to Sunday school. When I was a street kid, I used to go to Sunday school. They fed me, they took care of me, and they told me Bible stories. So, I brought my friends to that church; it was a safe place. We all fell asleep there, and after that we went different directions.

One day I was walking on the street, and suddenly I saw one of the orphanage caregivers walking towards me. We met by chance; she was on her own business in the city and just happened to walk into me. I looked at her thinking, "She looks familiar, where have I seen her?" Suddenly, she called my name and I remembered everything. So, I ran away from her, but she was with a man and he caught me. They brought me back to the orphanage. Other runaways were already there. After that I was no longer trusted, I was always watched. I could not go

anywhere by myself, even to the bathroom; I had to have someone with me. After a while, one day I approached the caregivers and told them, “Enough, I promise I will never run away again”, and they believed me. It was okay after that.

In the orphanage, for the first time I started to read and write. I learned quickly. Everything seemed easy for me until one year some doctors came to test us. They asked many questions and, although I knew the answers, I was scared of them and my score came out low. Ever since then my self-esteem dropped and I became insecure and fearful of people.

I loved being in school. I loved literature and I loved writing poems. My first poems were about nature, but when I matured a little, when I felt hurt and alone, I used to write about all that. I don't write now. But if I would write a poem now it would be about life, about difficulties and problems.

I always missed my parents. I still miss them. I don't know anything about my birth mother, only her name. She left me in the hospital, but my father managed to take me with him. He took care of me for a while, then he met my stepmother and we lived together. When I was seven they separated. After that my father started drinking, and I started living on the street. I found my father two years ago. It was a very sad reunion; he was ill, he had cancer. I don't know if he is alive now, probably not.

I never dreamed of being adopted. I would not live in a family; I would run away. Running away is always my first reaction to change. In the orphanage I could tolerate kids; I could stay with them, but not with a family. I needed freedom and in the orphanage I felt free, just like I feel now.

So, I am glad there are orphanages. I think it was better for me to live in an orphanage than to stay with my father. I would not have the life I have now. I probably would not be alive

now. Life in the orphanage changed me a lot. I learned to be kind, compassionate and understanding. The orphanage did not prepare me for independent life, however. I thought life would be easier. I wish in the orphanage we were taught more of the life skills. I also wish the caregivers in the orphanage would give us more lectures on sex education so that what happened to me would not happen to others.

I was in a relationship with a guy from the orphanage for two years. One day I found out I was pregnant. It was a very difficult time for me. In the orphanage you are not supposed to get pregnant. I felt tremendous shame and I was scared. At the same time, I blamed the administration for keeping me there. I was the oldest kid and at the age when you want to have sex, you want to experience life. But because I started school late I had to stay to finish my education.

In the orphanage when they found out I was pregnant, they took me to one clinic, then another and another. I did not know they wanted to do an abortion; I thought I was getting some treatment. But there was one nurse who talked to me. She told me about what a baby looks like at four months and when I imagined that he has fingers and toes I started crying. I started calling my Christian friends asking what I should do. I was scared. My friend Alex, he called the orphanage director and told her if they do anything against my will there will be legal consequences. Next day I was released from the hospital and sent away to a vocational school. Our director told me she had to bribe the school authorities to enroll me.

I do regret my relationship in the orphanage, but I have no regrets about having a child. Having a child has changed me and my life forever. I have a sense of purpose in life now. I love being a mother; I love taking care of my son. The most enjoyable time for me is time spent with my child. If I had not had my son, most likely I would have ended up on the streets again,

drinking and sleeping around. I think it was meant to be this way; God gave me a child to save me and I am thankful for this gift.

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My first interview with Marina ended on a positive note. It was the Marina that I always knew – positive, cheerful, and open. In my follow-up phone interview, however, her story was different. I heard the voice of a desperate orphan filled with the fear of adult life and tears of loneliness. At the end, when she had exhausted all her energy, I did not dare to ask her my question regarding the importance of sharing her story. Instead, I asked, “How can I help you?” She answered, “You already helped me; you listened to my story. Do you know how I feel now? Like after taking a long shower — I feel fresh and clean.” Her storytelling was a cleansing experience — the renewal of spirit and restoration of hope. The process of healing.

### **Olya’s story**

I was seven years old when my mom brought me and my sister to the orphanage. We did not know where we were going; she told us “This is going to be your new school.” That is how I ended up living in the orphanage. Before, I had a family; I had a dad who loved me and a mom who did not. She loved my younger sister, Natasha. She used to tell me “You are a mistake in my life.” She got pregnant with me by mistake. Upon my birth she abandoned me in the hospital. Six months later my dad found me and brought me home to live with him and my grandma. He was only twenty-one at that time. He and my grandma took care of me until I was eighteen months old, then my parents reunited and married. That is when my sister Natasha was born. So, she was the love child, not me.

When I was five, my dad went to prison for a crime he did not commit. My mom got into trouble for burglary and he took the blame for her. He thought it was the right thing to do; he wanted us to have a mom. When he died few years later, my mom blamed me for his death. I

don't understand why. I still can't forgive her for that. I don't miss my mom. I don't know where she is now and I don't miss her. My sister, on the other hand, she misses her a lot. They were always close; my security was my dad and grandma. They both are dead now. I don't have sisterly feelings towards my sister. I know she is my sister, but I don't have much feeling towards her. I wish I had a brother.

In the orphanage I adapted to the new life relatively quickly, in a week or two. I think the orphanage is a good thing for kids like us. In the orphanage, I always knew I had a roof over my head and food on the table. I knew that nothing would happen to me; it was a safe place to stay. At home I did not have that feeling.

Sometimes my sister and I spent summers at home; during those times our mother often left us alone for days. We had to fetch food for ourselves. We worked to survive. We would pick cherries for people. The cherries were our daily food. Other days when we made some money we would buy bread and cookies in the store. We used to hide them from our mom.

So, I appreciate life in the orphanage. For the most part, it was good. I have never been mistreated in the orphanage; although, I remember one incident when I felt very hurt. One of the caregivers accused me of stealing her phone. I told her I did not touch it, but she did not believe me. It was a sad day for me. We had visitors, our sponsors, that day and everyone was happy but me. I had to walk around the campus searching for her phone. She actually left it home by accident. She called me afterwards and apologized, but it did not matter; my day was ruined because of her.

Other than that, I was never mistreated in the orphanage. I had good friends in the orphanage. Four years after the orphanage, I am still in touch with them. I can still call them anytime if I need help with anything.

What I would change in the orphanage is I would improve education and give more freedom to prepare children for independent life. I would include teaching life skills; I would give us more chores and responsibilities. They teach us theory, but don't give us the chance to practice it. For example, I learned to cook because some summers I spent at home with my grandmother. Others don't have that opportunity. For them independent life is a real challenge.

My plan for the future is to continue my education. I don't know exactly what I want to pursue, but I want it to be something meaningful and practical.

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When I asked Olya for an interview, she told me, "I have no story; my life was boring and ordinary." The interview process brought up some painful memories to her and although we had tea during our conversation and she was wrapped in my shawl, she sat shivering. I felt bad for causing her such distress. Despite the obvious stress, Olya, however, insisted on continuing the process. "It is actually interesting to talk about the past. I don't think often about it." After the interview, she shared her experiences with other orphans, encouraging them for an interview saying, "You are going to like it. I thought the interview would be difficult, but actually, it was fun and it helped me. I feel better now." The interview was a healing experience for her, and she was able to let the past go. Also, it was a discovery of a simple pleasure of being an author of her own story.

### **Tanya's story**

It's been two years since I graduated from the orphanage. The way I imagined life after the orphanage is very different from the life I have now. I thought I would continue my education. Study, study and study – that was all I thought about while living in the orphanage. I love learning, so I imagined my life going in that direction. However, my life took a different route.

My first shock of independent life was finding out that I don't have orphan status. Having an "orphan" status means after leaving the orphanage you have a full governmental scholarship for your education, food provision and housing. I thought I will have all these benefits. On the first day of my independent life, however, I learned that I am not qualified for that. I came to the school cafeteria with the girls from the orphanage. The food on the table was short one plate, so I asked for it. They asked my name and said, "Sorry, your name is not on the list; you are not an orphan." I was shocked; I did not understand it. You see, in the orphanage I was receiving monthly allowances, "orphans money." I relied on continuing to receive governmental support and planned my future accordingly. So, when I learned that I was not qualified for orphan's benefits, my adulthood started.

At first I stayed in dorms, but soon I realized it was not a safe place. So I moved in to live with Marina. I lived on a small amount of child support money the government collected from my mother.

Yes, I have a mother; I knew she was alive. From our director in the orphanage, I learned she was paying child support money. But this is all I knew about her for all the years I lived in the orphanage. I did not know she still had her parental rights over us. She never visited me and my brother. About my father, I do not know anything about him, not even his last name. My last name is the name of my half-sister's father. When I was about to be taken to the orphanage, the authorities tried to make him pay a child support. But, since he was not my biological father, he had to officially disown me. I remember, I was at my grandma's when the officials came with a seal and the documents and made him sign the papers in my presence. I was nine then. I don't know why they had to do this to him; I always knew he was not my father. My older sisters lived with him, but I and my younger brother stayed with our mother. My brother was a small child

then, and I always had to carry him on my shoulders. I remember we were always hungry. We used to beg on the streets for food. Mother did not take care of us. She was an alcoholic, and we often ran away together when she was drunk. We ended up in the orphanage together because we ran away from the hospital. We went to our grandma's and social services soon came to take us to the orphanage.

Looking back in my life, I thank God for the orphanage. I liked it there. I liked going to school and learning new things. When I lived with mother, I attended school; I was in the fourth grade but I did not know how to read or write; I learned that in the orphanage. I remember I asked my teachers a lot of questions. They had great interest in me, and I was able to catch up with the rest of the kids.

I think it is up to a child to learn things. In the orphanage caregivers put in a lot of effort to teach us. Of course, there are some injustices, too. On the other hand, there is a lot of mistreatment and rudeness from children towards the caregivers. Now, when I visit my brother in the orphanage, I see that clearly. It is obvious to me now that children do not treat caregivers with the respect they ought to. As for me, I am grateful for my life in the orphanage.

I am not in favor of foster families — though, a family is the best option for the child. In a family you develop intellectually, you learn social skills and house work. However, not all families treat children right. I had a chance to live in a foster family, but I refused. There were other kids in that family and I did not want to live with other kids. I wanted to be only two of us — my brother and me. My whole life revolves around him. I have always been his caregiver; I could not imagine being separated from him. When I left the orphanage, it was very difficult for both of us.

After the orphanage, I stayed a few months in vocational school. It was very difficult. I had to live on very little money; I could not afford to buy anything. If there had not been the support of my friends, the fellow graduates from the orphanage, I don't know if I would have survived. They offered me food, shelter and clothing when I needed it most. Friends and their support are the other things that I am grateful for from my experience of the orphanage.

After a few months I dropped out from the vocational school and moved in to live with my boyfriend. We are married now. Now, I don't even think about going back to school. I learned how to cook, how to tend livestock, do gardening. These are my primary responsibilities now. My husband loves me. I love my life now; I am completely satisfied with it. I am happy.

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For the outside reader, Tanya's story may seem to be a story with a happy ending. For me however, her story is a story of struggle to prove herself. At the orphanage, Tanya was an honor student, and everyone predicted a bright future for her – a college degree, higher education, and successful marriage. However, one month into college, Tanya became pregnant and dropped out of school; a couple of months later, she had a miscarriage. Tanya felt guilt and shame over losing a baby; she thought it was her fault because, at first, she did not want this baby. On top of that, her orphanage cohort believed she had aborted the baby. A few months after, Tanya married, became pregnant again and everything seemed okay. A month before my visit, Tanya experienced another trauma – she gave birth to a baby boy, but the baby did not survive. Again, Tanya took the guilt of a baby's death upon herself. She felt guilty and that she was being punished again. When I visited her, she seemed to have recovered and to be content with her life. However, throughout the interview, I could hear her talking not to me, but to people I was to visit next – the orphanage staff and the children. She knew that everyone in the orphanage would

be asking about her, so she took the interview as her chance to give an account of her own version of the story — “to write her own ending.” She wanted them to know that even though she had disappointed her teachers by her academic failure, she was happy; she wanted to prove to them that she was a success in her domestic role of a farmer's wife. She wanted her peers in the orphanage to know that she would never abort her child. She wanted to show everyone that her personal tragedy had not broken her spirit. She is strong because of God’s grace in her life. I left her house with a feeling of witnessing something amazing – a rebirth of her spirit and her personal empowerment through the owning her story.

### **Vika’s story**

Actually, I don’t know Vika’s story. She never shared her story with me. Vika has always been one of those invisible children who are not attractive physically and who keep quiet. Her facial features reflect the consequences of being prenatally exposed to alcohol. It was so rare to see her smile; when she did, other kids teased her mercilessly about her bad teeth. I had never seen her playing with other girls; she was always alone. Lacking a firsthand account, I share here a story *about* Vika; a story about her empowerment.

The summer she left the orphanage, I came as usual with small going-away gifts for the graduates. I also brought some pieces of lingerie for the girls. One day, I invited Vika over and offered her to be the first one to choose a piece. She was thrilled; it did not take her a long time to pick. She did not look carefully like the other girls would do; she picked a bright pink piece and asked me to keep it until her last day in the orphanage. “The girls may take it”, she explained. After that, every time I came to the orphanage, she would come, sit quietly besides me for some time, then kiss me saying, “I have to go now.” I understood that the kiss was her way of expressing gratitude. The day she left the orphanage, she came over and thanked me again saying, “I always wanted to have a pink bra.” Since then, there has not been much

communication between us. Although we stayed in touch through social media, I knew that Vika had reading disabilities and could not read, so we interacted mostly by exchanging pictures and simple words.

Last year my fieldwork brought me to a place where many orphans I know were getting vocational training. It was my birthday. I knew many of them were planning to come for tea and cake. I did not know if Vika was in town. Late in the evening, I heard someone knocking on the door. It was Vika. She came to wish me a happy birthday. In her hands she had a cake decorated with pink flowers. However, it was not the decoration that was so special; it was the cake itself. In preparation for that day, I had searched all the grocery stores in the town hoping to find a cake, but had had no luck. Eventually, someone helped me order a cake from the local ladies. So, the cake issue was taken care of. Vika also could not find a cake in a local store; that is why she took the trouble of getting on a bus and going to the neighboring town to find a cake for me.

That act of going an extra mile spoke volumes about Vika — it showed her true character. Being naturally shy and quiet she could not express herself verbally very well. Her stories and gratitude were always expressed in actions. That cake told me a story, a story of empowerment. The harsh orphanage environment did not always allow her to show herself authentically. Now that she was out of the orphanage and living independently, she could show her true heart; she could express herself in the way she wanted. She could experience the power of giving. For my reader, this story might be a “cake” story. But for me personally, Vika’s story is a story of growth in confidence, transformation and personal empowerment.

When orphans lack the voice or the ability to tell a story, what is the best way to empower them if not through storytelling? By acknowledging their stories and doing God’s work; by sharing stories *about* them.

## Conclusion

This thesis project presents the beginning stage of my research — the collection of orphans' stories and evaluation of their experiences as storytellers. From my own observation I see significant benefits of storytelling for orphans. My preliminary findings point out that storytelling matters; it brings meaning to orphans' lives; it heals their pain and hurt; it gives them power and authority over their lives. The orphans I met with are still “writing” their stories. Many of them are not aware of the healing power of sharing their trauma and the power of owning their stories. The social stigma against social orphans and their past experiences often prevents them from sharing their hurt and pain. However, stories, just as our lives, are meant to be shared; no one can live their story alone, especially the story of trauma.

The long-term effect of storytelling in the orphans' life I have yet to discover. However, I am confident that my findings would support my thesis statement — storytelling brings healing and empowerment to orphans. Just today, as I was writing this work, I received a call from one of my interviewees — Demko. I took this opportunity to follow up on our interview nearly a year ago. He said that sharing his story brought him relief and peace.

In the orphanage, there is so much of the negative building up inside of you, but there are no trustworthy listeners with whom you can share all that. You want to unload your heart, but you can't do it alone. I think that sharing stories is not only helpful, but needed for many children in the orphanage. Personally, after our talk, I felt better inside and my heart was at ease.

I conclude my thesis project with Demko's testimony. His message needs no interpretation. It says it all — the need to share and the healing effect of sharing. Sharing his story was a healing experience for Demko. But if Demko, a confident, well-respected leader among orphans felt a need to share his story and his feelings, how much greater this need is for

the thousands of others, overlooked and not noticed orphans like Vika and Andriy? The storytelling approach brings healing and empowerment for orphans; it needs to be recognized as valuable and integrated in orphan care. I hope that my small work, my findings, will reach out to others — the caregivers, the practitioners, and simply to those who care for orphans' wellbeing, and inspire them to create a space for orphans stories and become active participants in the process of orphans' healing and empowerment.

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