

Tom A. Steffen

**Reconnecting God's
Story to Ministry**



**Cross-cultural
storytelling
at home and
abroad**



Why Tell Stories?

Bree said, “And now, Tarkheena, tell us your story. And don’t hurry it—I’m feeling comfortable now.” Aravis immediately began, sitting quite still and using a rather different tone and style from her usual one. For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you’re taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.

C.S. LEWIS

Scholars now see the story in the study, the tale in the theory, the parable in the principle, and the drama in the life.

MARGARETE SANDELOWSKI

Though it took some time, I eventually built enough skill in the Ifugao language and culture to make public teaching possible. I enthusiastically developed a number of Bible lessons that followed the topical outline we received in pre-field training: the Bible, God, Satan, humanity, sin, judgment, and Jesus Christ. Once listeners were introduced to the Scriptural authority-base, I quickly moved on to the

second part of the outline (God), and so forth. I presented the lessons in a topical, systematic format. My goal was not only to communicate the gospel, but to communicate it in such a way that the listeners could effectively articulate it to others. The goal: a church-planting movement.

But as I taught, I soon realized that the Ifugao found it extremely difficult to follow the topical presentations and found it even harder to explain what they had heard to others. I was astonished and perplexed.

Some changes were obviously necessary, so I added a number of stories from the Old Testament to illustrate the abstract theological concepts. The lessons now included concrete, pictorial characters and objects (e.g., creation, the fall, Cain and Abel, the flood, the escape from Egypt, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Tabernacle, Elijah and Baal). The response was phenomenal. Not only did the evangelistic sessions come alive, the recipients became instant evangelists, telling the stories to family and friends enthusiastically. From then on I integrated stories in all my evangelistic efforts.

Storytelling has become a lost art for many Christian workers not working with children. As discussed in the previous chapter, a number of hollow myths have led people to question the purpose and usefulness of stories, clouding their potential. For example, consider the myth that stories should target children because they provide excellent entertainment, but that adults eventually outgrow the need for stories, replacing them with more sophisticated, objective, propositional ideas. This myth fails to consider the fact that dogmas, creeds, and theology, are derived from concrete characters in the midst of elaborate stories. As a

result of such myths, Christian workers have often set aside storytelling to the detriment of the gospel. Therefore, to help reconnect God's stories to evangelism-discipleship, I will highlight nine reasons why storytelling should become a skill practiced by all Christian workers, at home and abroad, mono-culturally and cross-culturally (see Table 2.1 below).

Table 2.1 Eight Reason to Use Stories

- Storytelling is a universal form of communication.
- Approximately two-thirds of the world's population prefer the concrete mode of learning.
- Stories connect with our imagination and emotions.
- Every major religion uses stories to socialize its young, convert potential followers, and indoctrinate members.
- Approximately 75 percent of the Bible is narrative.
- Stories create instant evangelists.
- Jesus taught theology through stories.
- Stories are metaphors for life.

Storytelling is a Universal Form of Communication

No matter where one travels in this world, people love to tell and listen to stories. Age does not deter this desire. Whether they are young children, teenagers, or senior citizens, all enjoy entering the life experiences of others

through stories. All enjoy hearing or viewing a good story, whether fiction or reality.

Whatever the topic discussed, stories often become an integral part of the dialogue. Whether used to argue a point, interject humor, illustrate a key insight, comfort a despondent friend, challenge the champion, or simply pass the time of day, a story has a unique way of finding its way into the conversation.

Stories can be heard anywhere. One can hear stories in church, the courthouse, the movie theater, the restroom, the restaurant, the home, the bus, the car, the locker room, the prison, the mortuary, or on a walk in the woods. Geographic location does little to deter the flow of stories.

Fisher (1987, 62) captures the reason why stories are told universally when he calls the human race *homo narrans* (lit. "narrative people"). People, by design, he claims, are storytelling animals. I agree but also argue that we are storytelling animals because the great Storyteller created us. The human race, made in God's image, is *homo narrans* because the Creator is *Deus narrans*. God and narrative are inseparable, therefore humans and narrative are inseparable.

Not only do all people tell stories, they have a need to do so. This leads us to the second reason for storytelling.

The Majority of the World's Population Prefers Learning by Stories

According to Barrett and Johnson (2003), the illiterate and semi-literate peoples in the world probably outnumber

literates (see Table 2.2). People with such backgrounds tend to express themselves through concrete forms (stories, symbols, rituals) rather than abstract concepts (propositional thinking and philosophy). If Christian workers, argues Klem (1982), rely too heavily on evangelism and teaching strategies based upon abstract, literary foundations for this audience, two-thirds of the world may be bypassed.

Table 2.2 World Literate / Non-literate Population Projections

	1990	1970	mid-2000	mid-2003	2025
1	296.258	1,475.194	3,261.345	3,437.306	5,046.637
2	777.363	837.639	980.303	986.852	958.316

(Figures shown are in millions; 1 refers to Literates, 2 refers to Non-literates)

Source: Barrett & Johnson, *IBMR*, 28(1):25, 2004.

I actually had the opportunity to experience this first hand! We were privileged to be part of Ifugao history as they moved from an oral society to a literate society. I often served as an official witness for various “legal” transactions so that if a dispute arose at a later time, I could be called to testify as to what had happened. As literacy became dominant, however, paper and the signature replaced the need for witnesses. The move to literacy changed Ifugao culture forever as written contracts deemphasized the virtue of personal character that had served to validate verbal contracts.

Literacy affected a number of other elements in the Ifugao society, for example the definition of truth. In the oral dominated society it meant trustworthiness, faithfulness, loyalty. In the literacy-dominated culture it changed to

accuracy and objectivity. This, in turn, impacted the perception of God's Word.

In America, the trend is reversing. A growing number of Americans prefer the concrete mode of communication. One example of this is an undergraduate student I knew who was seeking employment in the university library. During the job interview, he confessed to my wife that he had never read a book completely through before coming to the university. And he was a college student applying to work in the library! He is obviously not alone.

This shift is due, at least in part, to a major shift in communication preference. One of the reasons behind this shift (and the dropping literacy rate) is the increasing amount of television that Americans consume. With the average TV sound bite now only a few seconds, and the average image length less than a second (often without linear logic), it is no wonder that those under its daily influence have little time or desire for reading which develops and reinforces linear thought. Consequently, newspaper businesses continue to dwindle while visual media production companies proliferate. To help accommodate this growing audience, wise Christian workers have made ample use of video clips, symbols, and drama. They recognize that oral and visual (print) messages now come together simultaneously through electronic media and are the most useful medium for communicating gospel truths.

Stories Connect with our Imagination and Emotions

Effective communication touches not only the mind, it also touches the heart and emotions; it is holistic in nature.

Annie Dillard captures this thought in *Teaching A Stone to Talk*: “We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery.” One of the best modes of communication to bring about such awakening is through the mystery of story.

While stories provide dates, times, places, names, and chronologies, they simultaneously produce tears, cheers, fear, anger, confidence, defensiveness, conviction, sarcasm, fantasy, despair, and hope. Stories draw listeners into the lives of the characters whether they are real or fictitious. Listeners not only hear what happens to such characters, through their imagination they vicariously participate in the experience. Schneidau eloquently captures this point when he states that “stories have a way of tapping those feelings that we habitually anesthetize” (1986, 136).

People appreciate stories because they mirror their total lives of fact and feeling. Scripture’s cast of characters—some 2930 strong—make identification possible, no matter what one’s cultural background, gender, or generation. From prophets, kings, sages, rogues, farmers, priests, adulterers, scribes, Pharisees, crooks, apostles, doctors, teachers, tax collectors, and business people, all our stories are present within the sacred Storybook, drawing us to the Creator.

Bible stories, as do all stories, uniquely interweave reason, mystery, and reactions, causing listeners to reflect on both personal and group beliefs and actions. This collection of sacred stories unleashes the imagination, emotions, and facts in panoramic fashion, making learning an exciting, life-changing experience (see Figure 2.1).

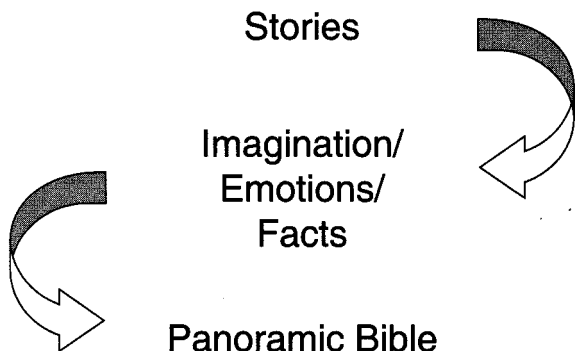


Figure 2.1 Bible as Sacred Storybook

Every Major Religion Uses Stories to Socialize its Young, Convert Potential Followers, and Indoctrinate Members

Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity—all use stories to expand (and limit) membership, assure ongoing generational conversion, and bring disciples to maturation. “Sanskrit scriptures make numerous references to the practice of storytelling. The Tripitaka, part of the Buddhist scriptures, contains a number of dialogues, lives of saints and sages, fables, and other types of tales. And while Taoism and Confucianism do not have the same wealth of story material, their proponents too use story to propagate belief” (Shaw 1999, 39).

Whether Paul was evangelizing Jews or Gentiles, the

audience heard relevant stories. Unbelieving Jews heard about cultural heroes such as Abraham, Moses, and David (Acts 13:13–43). Unbelieving Gentiles heard about the powerful God behind both the creation story and the final judgment (Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34). Maturing believers heard the same stories with a different emphasis. Paul certainly utilized his Jewish expertise as a storyteller for the sake of the gospel.

The Israelites were experts in the use of story, symbol, and ritual to maintain their distinctive identity in a very diverse and often oppositional world. Besides Sabbath services, pilgrimages to Jerusalem, circumcision, and kosher laws, the Israelites accomplished this through celebrating three annual festivals: Passover (barley harvest), Pentecost (wheat harvest & bringing of first fruits to Temple), and Tabernacles (grape harvest). Wright observes:

They thus symbolically celebrated the blessing of Israel's god, upon his Land and his people and thereby drew together the two major covenantal themes of Temple and Land. In addition, Passover celebrated the exodus from Egypt; Pentecost, the giving of Torah on Sinai; Tabernacles, the wilderness wandering on the way to the Promised Land. All three therefore focused attention on key aspects of Israel's story, and in the retelling of that story encouraged the people once again to think of themselves as the creator's free people, who would be redeemed by him and so vindicated in the eyes of the world. This theme was amplified in the prayers appointed for the different occasions. (1992, 234)

Like all major religions, the Jews used stories to differentiate true members from false, truth from error, acceptable behavior from unacceptable. Stories created

community. Could one of the reasons for this be that stories provide an inoffensive, non-threatening way of challenging basic beliefs and behavior? In much of the world, stories still serve as third-party go-betweens, allowing people to overcome the universal problem of shame.

Approximately Seventy-Five Percent of the Bible is Narrative

Figure 2.2 depicts the three basic genres that dominate the landscape of the Scriptures: narrative, poetry, and thought-organized format. The narrative sections are predominant covering some 65–75 percent of the text, depending upon definition. Fee and Steward observe that “the Bible contains more of the type of literature called ‘narrative’ than it does of any other literary type. For example, over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative. Since the Old Testament itself constitutes three-quarters of the bulk of the Bible, it is not surprising that the single most common type of literature in the entire Bible is narrative” (1981, 78).

Biblical writers over the centuries have documented the actions of a host of characters: from kings to slaves, from those who follow God to those who live for personal or collective gain, from animals to objects. Such stories serve as mirrors to reflect our own perspective of life, and more importantly, God's. Koller astutely points out the real purpose for the inclusion of these characters in Scripture: “The Bible was not given to reveal the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but to reveal *the hand of God* in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; not as a revelation of Mary

and Martha and Lazarus, but as a revelation of *the Savior of Mary and Martha and Lazarus*” (1962, 32).

Poetry, what Schank calls “an ossified distilled story,” covers approximately 15 percent of the sacred text. Songs, lamentations, and proverbs provide readers and listeners with a variety of avenues to express and experience deep inner emotions. These portions of Scripture demonstrate the affective side of people as well as the God behind such emotions.

Much of the poetry relies on communal stories that provide a framework for understanding. For example, some of the Psalms carefully express the deep emotions that David experienced during his arduous flight from Saul described in 1 Samuel. In *Announcing the Kingdom*, Glasser notes another connection: “Proverbs 1–8 can be used to provide linkage with the universal history of Genesis 1–11, since these chapters speak of the wisdom that all peoples have because of their common human ancestry” (2003, 161).

The thought-organized format comprises the remaining 10 percent. The apostle Paul’s Greek-influenced writings fall under this category where logical, linear thinking tends to dominate. Interestingly, many westerners schooled in the tradition of the Greeks (including myself) prefer to spend the majority of time in the Scripture’s smallest literary style. If God communicated the majority of his message to the world through stories, what does this suggest to Christian workers?

The reader will notice that I have stated that the percentages are approximate. It is very difficult to isolate the exact percentages of the various genres, especially since most biblical authors ingeniously incorporate several genres

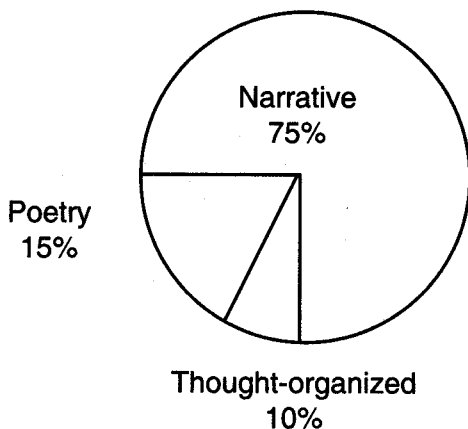


Figure 2.2 Major Literary Styles of the Bible (Steffen 1997, 122)

within their writings. For example, notice the use of poetry set in a narrative context in Isaiah and other prophets, and the use of sermons in the narrative framework of Acts. Why is it that Bible authors chose to communicate their contribution to the sacred Storybook in multi-genres, most often framed in narrative? Why did God not create a literate Adam and Eve?

I think this is because people find it very easy to repeat a good story. Whether the story centers around juicy gossip or the gospel of Jesus Christ, something within each of us wants to hear and tell such stories. Suppressing a good story is like trying to resist a jar full of one's favorite cookies, especially when you've "got milk." Sooner or later the temptation becomes too strong; the cookie gets eaten; the story gets told. And told stories get retold and retold. What better way is there to communicate the things of God to a global audience?

Stories Create Instant Evangelists

Because the Ifugao could relate well to the life-experiences of Bible characters, they not only applied the stories to their lives, they immediately retold them to family and friends even before they switched faith allegiance to Jesus Christ. Stories created storytellers, and storytellers created stories. The Ifugao became instant evangelists.

Jesus Taught Theology Through Stories

It is interesting to note that Jesus never wrote a book on systematic theology, yet he taught theology wherever he went. As a holistic thinker, Jesus often used parabolic stories to tease audiences into reflecting on new ways of thinking about life. There *is* another way to teach doctrine. Martin Buber observes that one does not have to teach Bible doctrines topically or systematically to teach doctrine: "Scripture does not state its doctrine as doctrine, but by telling a story, and without exceeding the limits set by the nature of story. It uses the methods of story-telling to a degree, however, that world literature has not yet learned to use. . . . Hence, it remains for us latecomers to point out the significance of what has been hitherto overlooked, neglected, insufficiently valued" (McConnell 1986, 14).

As Jesus' listeners wrestled with new theology introduced innocently yet intentionally through parabolic stories, they were challenged to examine traditions, form new images of God, and transform behavior. To remain content with past realities became uncomfortable; yet to take up Jesus' challenges to step out of the boat, taste new

wine, display the golden lamp stands, turn from family members, extend mercy to others, search for hidden objects, and donate material goods and wealth to the poor were not comfortable choices either. Whichever direction the listeners took, they found no middle ground. They had met God. Jesus' stories, packed with theology, caused reason, imagination, and emotions to collide, demanding a change of allegiance. Jesus' example forcibly demonstrates that stories can effectively communicate theology.

Stories are Metaphors for Life

David fell right into the prophet Nathan's intentional narrative trap (2 Samuel 12:1-7). He understood the value of a single lamb to a poor herder, particularly one raised by the family. By taking the poor man's lamb to feed a guest instead of one of his many, the rich man failed to demonstrate pity. Burning with anger and disgust, David righteously condemned the man to death. And then he heard those stinging words: "You are the man." As David's brain tried to assimilate his own self-condemnation, unwelcome reality began to set in.

Volger helps us understand not only the power of Nathan's story but stories in general: "Every good story reflects the total human story, the universal human condition of being born into this world, growing, learning, struggling to become an individual, and dying. Stories can be read as metaphors for the general human situation, with characters who embody universal, archetypal qualities, comprehensive to the group as well as the individual" (1998, 32). Thus the story's juxtaposition of the metaphors of the rich and the poor

naturally brought out David's anger because he understood the rich person's misuse of power and privilege.

Stories and symbols connect with people because they connect the familiar to the unfamiliar. Stories are in essence metaphors for life (McKee 1997, 25). Williams expands: "[M]etaphor is a way of presenting a truth that is wholly or partly unknown by likening it to something that is known to the person or persons under instruction. A metaphor is an aid to the perception of a truth (it's intuitive recognition); it helps us to 'get a handle' on a truth, but it does not necessarily furnish an explanation, certainly not a complete explanation, of the truth in question" (1999, 1). Stories are metaphors that powerfully persuade, creating and recreating one's reality.

Symbol-Based Stories are the Foundation of a Worldview

What provides the foundation for deep-level presuppositions? Scholars have offered multiple possibilities: worldview universals, interests influenced by economics, social relationships, symbols, and narrative. For example, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984), J. Bruner's *The Culture of Education* (1996), editors Hauerwas and Jones' *Why Narrative?* (1989), and Fisher's *Human Communication as Narration* (1987) all argue for the formation of "worldview-by-means-of-story."

But do these writers overlook the powerful foundational role of symbol as developed by anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz? While Fisher defines man as *homo narrans*, Burke believes they are *homo*

*symbolans*³ (lit. “symbol using man”). He defines man as “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animals” (quoted in Fisher 1987, 63). I think it’s best to integrate the two: symbol-based narrative serves as the lifelong, foundational conceptualization agent that allows for the (re)construction of reality and relationships. Shared symbols and stories socialize personality within the broader communal context; they construct and reconstruct social values and social relations (1998). Investigating stories and related symbols just may be one of the strongest, integrative, cultural analysis tools that exist.

Conclusion

The Bible begins with the story of creation and ends with a vision of God’s recreation. Peppered generously between Alpha and Omega are a host of stories. While stories dominate the scriptural landscape, they rarely enter the Christian worker’s evangelism-discipleship strategies intentionally. Leland Ryken cogently asks the following:

Why does the Bible contain so many stories? Is it possible that stories reveal some truths and experiences in a way that no other literary form does—and if so, what are they? What is the difference in our picture of God, when we read stories in which God acts, as compared with theological statements about the nature of God? What does the Bible communicate through our imagination that it does not communicate through our reason? If the Bible uses the imagination as one way of communicating truth, should we not show an identical confidence in the power of the

³ The term is mine though the idea is prevalent in his work.

imagination to convey religious truth? If so, would a good startpoint be to respect the story quality of the Bible in our exposition of it? (1979, 38)

Is it not time that today's Christian workers revitalize one of the world's oldest, most universal arts—storytelling? Such revitalization will not only increase communication between Christian workers and their audiences, but will also increase evangelization as members of the community of faith repeat the stories to family and friends.

For Christian workers to be effective, however, a precise understanding of the various storylands is necessary, and that is what we will examine in the next chapter.

Reflection

- What new questions does this chapter raise for you?
- What other reasons for telling stories would you add to this list?
- In the following passage, what is Alves' point?

“Please, tell us your stories,” the villagers said to the newcomers. The villagers were all silent and smiled as the Enlightened began telling the truth. But they did not tell stories. They opened thick books, treatises, commentaries, confessions—the crystallized results of their work. And it is reported that, as they spoke, the stars began to fade away till they disappeared, and dark clouds covered the moon. The sea was suddenly silent and the warm breeze became a cold wind.

When they finished telling the truth of history and

interpretation the villagers returned to their homes. And, no matter how hard they tried, they could not remember the stories they used to tell. And they slept dreamless sleep.

As to the members of the order, after so many years of hard scientific work, they had their first night of sound sleep, also without dreams. Their mission was accomplished. They had finally, told the truth.

(Alves, Rubem A., "The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet," *The Edward Cadbury Lectures*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990, 71).

- How do you react to Fackre's statement?

Narrative speaks in the idiom of the earth. Reality meets us in the concretions of time, place, and people, not in analytical discourse or mystical rumination. . . . Would a historical God speak to us in any other way than through history first and then in the "history-like" accounts of biblical narrative, the extraordinary in the ordinary? (Fackre 1984, 345–346).

- What ministry changes do you anticipate making?

For Further Reading

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