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The transforming power of story

All of us love a good, well-told story. The power of story reaches across all ages, cultures, and educational levels. A meaningful story can wake up a sleepy listener and engage our whole brain to make deep theological truths come alive!¹

I remember so well this story by one of our seminary Week of Prayer speakers:

“It happened when I was in the seventh grade. There was a little church school of eight grades with thirteen students in the whole school. Our teacher was just eighteen years old, and this was her first school. She knew her material, but she didn’t know how to control and discipline thirteen kids. She tried her best, but things got away from her, and midway through the school year, the school board met to see if she should be replaced.

“Some of the students were talking about her one day out on the playground below the schoolroom

window. I came up and heard them say they didn’t think she was a very good teacher and hoped we’d get a better one.

“When everyone is agreeing on their dislike of the teacher, there is only one thing to do: join them. So, I said, ‘I don’t like her either . . .’ Just as I finished my speech, I saw movement through the open window. There was my teacher standing where she thought we couldn’t see her. But I saw her and will never forget the look of despair on her face. She was looking at the floor, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Suddenly I felt sick. I rushed home and could not sleep very well that night. I had broken someone’s heart, someone who had done the best she could for me.

“The next day, when I got to school, I had to write her a little note and ask her to forgive me. I had broken the heart of a friend. I remembered all the

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things she had done for us: Helping us after school, buying us nice Christmas gifts, reading to us.

"She was allowed to finish out the school year. I was glad when I heard that she is still teaching!"²

Effective stories can instill values. This one has stuck in my memory for decades. For me, it illustrates the goodness of God that leads us to heart repentance and a closer relationship with Him.

A story sticks in our memory like glue and resurfaces over time, motivating and leading to positive actions.³ Hollywood wouldn't spend billions of dollars on story scripts if stories didn't work so well! Rick Sessoms (see Resources on page 27), shares the following truths:

"Eighty percent of the world's people—including seventy percent of Americans, are storycentric communicators; that is, they prefer to learn and are most likely to be influenced through stories, pictures, drama, and music rather than through reading and writing."⁴ Sessoms says the problem is that over 90 percent of Christian workers today communicate through facts, theoretical concepts, analytical information, and exhortations. "This disconnect overlooks a primary method of Jesus Himself and impedes the effective cultivation of leaders in the growing global church."⁵

This is so true! Jesus, our great Example of how to reach people, taught mainly through purposeful stories. "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them" (Mark 4:33, 34a, NKJV). All of Scripture is part of the grand narrative of the great controversy between Christ and Satan and the plan of salvation, with over 70 percent of it in story or narrative form.

Much scientific research has been done proving the powerful results of story. Reviews from over 350 research studies representing 15 separate fields of

discipline concluded, without one dissenting view, that story is an effective vehicle for teaching, motivating, and general communication of facts as well as concepts.⁶

Our hope for this special *Ministry* issue is that it will help each of us to ask the Lord whether we need to make adjustments for our communication to be as effective as Jesus'. We must use a variety of methods when sharing the gospel with others. Bullet points, exhortations, and PowerPoint slides can be helpful, but be sure to also include purposeful stories.

We have asked some of the best specialists in this topic to share how to use meaningful stories that can reach and change people. It begins with Richard Duerksen's great lead article on narrative preaching and teaching. Pat Gustin focuses on Bible story.

Kleber Gonçalves discusses postmodern people and the millennial generation and their preference for story. Amy Whitsett and Gideon Peterson both have moving articles on their experiences in reaching people of totally different worldviews and seeing the Lord change them through stories.

Ask the Lord to give you the stories He wants told to meet His needs in your people. Let's tell the stories God provides, and watch how He transforms lives through His stories! ▣

1 For more information, read Leo Widrich, "The Science of Storytelling: Why Telling a Story Is the Most Powerful Way to Activate Our Brains," *Lifehacker.com*, December 5, 2012, www.lifehacker.com/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-5965703.

2 This is a shortened version of the story as published in Morris Venden, *How to Make Christianity Real* (Arroyo Grande, CA: Concerned Communications, 1984), 61–63. Available on Amazon.com.

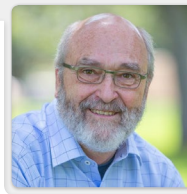
3 This concept was gleaned from Richard Duerksen, *Storycatcher: Powerful Stories That Will Impact Your Spiritual Journey* (Madrid, Spain: Safeliz, 2019).

4 Rick Sessoms, *Leading With Story: Cultivating Christ-Centered Leaders in a Storycentric Generation* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), back cover.

5 Sessoms, *Leading With Story*, back cover.

6 Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), 4.

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“Let me tell you a story”:

The transforming power of narrative preaching and teaching

Stories connect with the tenacity of glue, sometimes holding for decades while intermittently releasing memories that recalibrate personal values.

The “first” story was one God told Adam as they were naming the animals. As with all the best stories, its purpose was to reveal the character of God.

“How did all of this get here?” Adam asked.

“I spoke it into existence,” God answered.

“Really? How did you do that?” asked Adam as the two sat together near a herd of newly named giraffes.

“Well,” God answered, “In the beginning . . .”

And, you know *the rest of the story*.

Storytelling begins with story-catching, and that begins with liking people enough to listen—to listen to

their hearts, their hopes, their pains, their needs, their anger, their tears of hurt and tears of joy. Unless you listen, your sermonic stories will not fit and will not help make your people whole. On the other hand, if you listen, you will detect when broken hearts need to be hugged and when angry thoughts need to be calmed.

As you listen, stories will rise in your heart, narratives that reflect the lives your members are living, tales begging to be told in ways that will bring the congregational family together toward God, stories that will bring people to believe that Scripture speaks today just as it did “way back then.”

As you listen, your sermons will become transformational, a weekly shared experience that answers questions they have been struggling with at the breakfast table, in the boardroom, at the office, and in the chairs of the beauty salon. People talk, you know. They tell each other about their lives—usually stories that leave God out. Your ministry, your sermons, can change that. They can make God so real and personable that He will become the stuff of their stories. As business storytellers Ryan Mathews and Watts Welker say, “Long before the first formal business was established, before the first deal, the six most powerful words in any language were *Let me tell you a story*.”¹

Narrative preaching does not ignore God, truth, doctrines, or biblical exposition. It builds on all those, weaving them together with stories that make the stuff of God meaningful in the world where we live. Stories illustrate the precepts of truth, covering them with skin and giving them the breath of life. Continually be asking your Lord to reveal to you what stories He wants told. Without a personal relationship between God and the preacher, sermon words rattle like tumbleweeds across the dust of dry souls.

“Homiletics,” or “homily,” is about conversation and the enchantment of relationships.²

I used to ask, “What shall I preach, and how shall I preach it?” Then a professor told me I was preaching only for myself, not for the people. Now I ask, “How does this audience listen, and what would they love to hear?” Biblical truth is timeless. But the way each generation hears and appropriates truth is quite different. Asking how my congregation listens forced me to notice how they live. They look at their phones. They take a thousand pictures. They watch videos and movies on multiple platforms. They leave the TV on during meals. Often four or five devices are playing at the same time, and all of them are image and story-based rather than fact-based.

My friend Pastor Morris Venden once told me that the success of a sermon is in the pictures you leave in the minds of listeners. “They’ll forget your words but will remember the stories.”

In “the olden days,” whenever those were, people seemed satisfied with three points and a poem. Listening doesn’t work that way anymore. *What if, I thought to myself, I chose to preach in ways that matched how they’re listening?* After trying this for

four decades of preaching, I’ve settled on five reasons narrative preaching is a really good idea.

Five reasons narrative preaching is a good idea

1. *From complex to simple.* Narrative takes massively complex information and makes it simple, understandable, and actionable. If my church family is struggling with how to respond to violence, distrust, and exploitation in the community, I go back to 2 Kings 5 and the story of “Abigail,” the Israelite girl who chose to stand for God in Naaman’s house. She stood firm as God’s Girl, and before the story is over, her choice heals a rift between nations. A simple story like this provides an opening for a conversation about how to be “God’s Kids” in our own community.

2. *From informational to life changing.* Narrative preaching slips into hearts and minds, giving God better access to the soul. “You don’t know me,” hundreds of people have told me, “but when I was a teenager, you spoke at my school and told a story about Elijah running from Jezebel. That story changed my life and gave me a new way of seeing God. I think about it every time I’m in a tough place.”

I could have preached a three-point sermon about why it’s foolish to run from troubles. I could have shared 12 texts that prove God never leaves us, even when we leave Him. I could have done many fact-driven things. Instead, I chose to tell the story of a loving God who ran with a foolish prophet all the way to heaven. As Calvin Miller said, “Most people hear stories better than they hear megabytes of truth framed in point-driven logic.”³

3. *From age-specific to age-neutral.* Next time you preach, watch to see whether the kids are listening. I have discovered a fascinating truth about preaching. When I tell stories, everyone listens. Age is not an issue, except for the really old folks who honestly need a nap every morning. A good story, well told, captures the minds and hearts regardless of age. If I have listened well, the story I tell my congregation will help clarify challenges that health professionals are facing, will be meaningful for teenagers falling in love, will be helpful for mothers nursing babies, and may even reach audio-visual operators trying not to listen while they work.

But remember, narrative preaching is not just “telling a story.” It’s connecting people with God.

Preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick, way back in 1956, said it well: “A good sermon is an engineering operation by which a chasm is bridged so that spiritual goods on one side . . . are actually transported into personal lives upon the other. . . . It need never fail to make a transforming difference in some lives.”⁴

4. *From just head to head and heart.* Any presentation designed to effect life change requires access to both the mind and the heart. You cannot win one without the other. Preacher Paul understood this well and, after describing Jesus as the Creator, Savior, and coming King in the first two chapters of Colossians, he puts it all together in chapter 3: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1–3, NIV).

A well-told story convicts the mind of truth while also romancing the heart with hope. Here’s another way to explain what happens with narrative preaching. For right-brained people, the emotions of an interesting story allow the “truth” to slip in and capture both mind and heart. Left-brained people, on the other hand, focus on the “truth” and suddenly find their heart has come along. It takes both to effect life change. You cannot win one without the other.

5. *From speaking to, to conversing with.* A well-told story results in interactive listening, and when we’re all in the story together, the result is understanding and impact. Narratives demand response. Good stories bring me in until I am part of the plot, emotionally involved in the tension, the brokenness, the challenges, the opportunities, and (finally) the resolution. A narrative sermon makes listeners ask questions, seek more information, jump ahead, and become part of the story as you tell it.

What the best storytelling does is establish a three-way connection among the audience, the storyteller, and the characters in the story. A story well shared creates something new from genuine experience. This is one of the most powerful forms of bonding there is.

One of my favorite stories came from a young man and woman who told me how they were testing God on the issue of tithing. Still living a motorcycle-and-drugs lifestyle, they gave God 10 percent of their welfare check for three weeks, but God didn’t give them any of His Malachi 3 blessings. Then they chose to pay tithe on the man’s side business. It wasn’t much, but that week the business doubled. The next week it doubled again.

Are you with me? Isn’t it fun to see how the story sucks you in? You are thinking about how you ought to be tithing, but right now, you are wondering how the couple is dealing with the increases.

After about 10 weeks of the business doubling continually, the couple asked to speak with the pastor.

“Pastor,” they began, “you’ve probably noticed the large tithe we’ve been giving.”

“I have,” he answered.

“We’ve been testing God to see if your sermon about tithing was true, and we’ve learned that when you give God 10 percent of everything, He really comes through. We now have one of the largest marijuana businesses in the county.”

It’s a great story, and when I get to the “marijuana” line, everyone is fully committed. Then we begin a fully interactive conversation about tithing and why God might bless *even* a marijuana business. No, God does not encourage or aid drug use, but He is amazingly skilled in reaching people where they are.

What stories should I tell?

We have talked about why narrative sermons are a good idea. Let’s look at what kinds of stories you can use. Though these provide a useful set of categories, please remember that every great sermon is a gallery in which there hangs a single portrait—the portrait of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite authors, Ken Gire, provides an overview of the relationship between God and His followers, one that pastors would do well to remember every time they sit down to write a sermon or stand in the pulpit to deliver one. “The Christian life is about us following Christ’s lead, not about him following ours.

“He doesn’t ask us to write the notes to the music or choreograph the steps to the dance. He asks us merely to take his hand and follow him.”⁵

Jesus, the greatest storyteller of all time, had a unique approach to communicating through narrative. He told stories so that the people would not understand the message He was sending (see Luke 8:10). Then, around the campfires in the evening, He would explain the stories to His closest followers so that they would be able to explain them to the people—and to us. He knew that if He came right out and spoke the facts of the message clearly, His ministry would end before He was finished. So that the message would sink in slowly and stick in the minds of His listeners, Jesus used stories, parables, and narratives that told the truth more effectively than if He gave three points and was possibly stoned.

Jesus did not tell just parables. He retold stories from the Torah, referred to news reports from the contemporary press, talked about how a nearby farmer was planting his field, and illustrated the largesse of faith with a diminutive mustard seed. Leadership guru Stephen Denning provides a handy menu of several different kinds of stories leaders can utilize, which I have adapted into seven points that should be in your sermonic cookbook.

Seven story styles for effective preaching

1. *Stories to bring life change.* Life-change stories usually come from a recent and relevant event and include a hero with whom listeners can identify. They have a genuine, happy ending with successfully implemented change. A life-change narrative provides a model that can be followed. **(See, for example, the story “The Red Fire Truck” at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.)**

love show up in how we treat people every day. Many well-known, value-driven stories, like the good Samaritan, come from Scripture, but everyday life in your community is also a rich source for common-place illustrations. **(See, for example, the story “When Chiquita Cleans a Patient’s Room” at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.)**

5. *Stories to get us to work together.* Living as a church family amid a secular community is a constant battle between “good” and “evil.” Unfortunately, the battle often brings discord between the church and the world and between family members who prefer long prayers and those who prefer brief petitions. Or potlucks or no potlucks. Or green carpet instead of the threadbare orange that someone installed in 1962. There are always causes for division.

Carefully chosen stories can change the narrative and help bring unity especially if the story includes

My friend Pastor Morris Venden once told me that the success of a sermon is in the pictures you leave in the minds of the listeners. “They’ll forget your words but will remember the stories.”

2. *Stories to tell who we are.* A personal testimony fits well here. These stories provide honest, real-life pictures with humor and pain. They also include personal learning and behavior change. **(See, for example, the story “The Spanish Prayer” at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.)**

3. *Stories to explain the church.* These include wonderful stories of early church pioneers and missionaries and stories of how your congregation has grown. Knowing our history helps us move, with God, toward a better future. **(See, for example, the story “Pastor Anderson’s Oranges” at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.)**

4. *Stories to transmit values.* Value-driven stories help everyone understand how Christians live. They teach why we care about poor people, about racial equality, and about supporting children. This type of story demonstrates how our commitment to honesty, kindness, compassion, humility, and

enough humor to help us see how crazy this battle has become. Choose stories that rehearse the value of collaboration. Especially, choose stories that begin a time of family storytelling, an open time when storytelling begins to flow freely and laughter loosens hearts. **(See, for example, the story “Timmy and the Cement Truck” at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.)**

6. *Stories to share truth.* “God loves you even when you’re bad.” This is a true statement and a believable one. However, it becomes a living truth when you retell the story of the prodigal son or when you share the tale of King David and Bathsheba’s baby. Stories put skin on doctrines.

There is a crucial eternity moment in chapter 3 of John. It’s night, and Jesus is caught in an intense conversation with an inquisitor from the Sanhedrin. The conversation has swerved into a discussion of water, baptism, new birth, and wind. Nicodemus, the inquisitor who has come to “check out” this new

Messiah, stops the Master in mid-sentence to ask a question that isn't even on his interview sheet.

"Why are you here?"

"Nick," Jesus replies, smiling and placing His hand on the Pharisee's shoulder, "one day my Father and I were looking at the earth and noticed you, right here in Jerusalem. Dad pointed you out and said, 'I really love that fellow.' Then He turned to Me and asked, 'Son, would you be willing to go down to the earth, find Nicodemus, and show him how much We love him so that he will fall in love with Us? It would be so good to have him here living with Us rather than lost there on earth.'"

What if, I thought to myself, I chose to preach in ways that matched how they're listening?

There was a moment of silence, broken by a weak voice asking, "For me?"

"Yes, Nick. For you. And for whosoever else would like to come along."

7. *Stories to lead people toward the future.* My grandfather had a dream in 1967. Grandma had recently died, and Grandpa desperately wanted to die too. "Being alone is a bad deal," he whispered. In the dream, Grandpa was standing at the edge of a wide, rapidly flowing river. The water was muddy, swirling dangerously over an uneven bottom. On the other side, he could see fields of tall corn, each stalk heavy with multiple ears. Birds were singing. Horses were neighing happily. Families were laughing and playing games on thick, green grass. Everything had the aura of heaven.

An angel walked up beside Grandpa, saw the tears of desire on his cheeks, and asked whether he would like to go to the other side.

"Yes, please. Right now!"

"The water is deep and dangerous," the angel warned. "Here, take hold of this rope, and all will be well on your crossing."

Grandpa grasped the rope and stepped into the water. The river was rough and deep, far deeper and

swifter than he had expected. He held on tightly and, at times, felt the rope was actually pulling him along. After what seemed a complete lifetime, his feet touched the hard ground near the far bank.

He leaped onto the shore, still clutching tightly to the rope that had been his salvation. When he glanced down, he saw that the rope was only about a meter long. Just long enough to reach from his hand into the water. Just long enough for faith to do its work.

Many in your church family are lonely, discouraged, angry, and hungry for something better. Your stories can help them see God's solutions as that "something better." Your stories, modern and from Scripture, can flood their lives with the Light of hope.

"Can I learn to tell great stories?"

Can you learn to tell great stories? Yes—but with some pointers. Teaching people how to write stories, the author and editor Arthur Gordon says, "Unless the listener has a built-in sense of the dramatic, a natural ear for words, an ability to think fairly clearly, the persistence of a horsefly and the tenacity of a crocodile, you are probably wasting your time."⁶ Though I disagree with his conclusion, I must admit he has several good points, especially the one about the crocodile.

Here's another pound of advice from the same author: "There's no foolproof formula for short-story writing. . . .

"... If you're ever seized with an urge to try this crazy business, there are a few things to remember. In most cases, a story needs an appealing central character for the reader to focus on and identify with. This character should come into the story at Point A with some kind of *minus*—a problem, a fear, a threat, a danger, a broken relationship—and leave it at Point Z with a *plus*, a problem solved, a danger evaded, an objective gained, a relationship healed. In between Point A and Point Z there should be increasing complication, mounting suspense, and finally a logical and believable Point of Resolution where things get straightened out. Unless they're straightened out, the reader is going to feel dissatisfied, even cheated."⁷

Here are some pointers:

1. *Use simple words.* Simple words are best, especially for beginning storytellers. Flowery language, multiple adjectives, and dusty descriptions are more of a hindrance than a help. Pretend that you are speaking to a 12-year-old. That will cut out all words with more than three syllables (sal-va-tion still fits) and will force you to use simple descriptions. Amazingly, when you focus on 12-year-olds, everyone listens.

2. *Read voraciously.* Read to see how others tell stories. Read to find words you have never used. Read

good Samaritan stories, political stories, biographies of great people. Read what your people are reading so your stories will help them fill in the puzzles.

3. *Watch moving pictures.* Sign up with a Christian video service like Igniter.com. These people are expert storytellers. Watch news highlights, *National Geographic* specials about God, and videos your members ask whether you have watched. Though the devil is using video to capture the minds and emotions of us all, God is also a pretty amazing Producer.

4. *Choose descriptive phrases.* Begin, carefully, to use some of the purple phrases you discover in your reading and watching. These phrases, strings of pearls storytellers use to brighten the pictures, will clarify emotions, bring listeners further into your story, and provide those moments that will stick the story close to each heart, such as:

- “His face was lined with a thousand remembered smiles.”
- “Her singing brought nightingales to their knees.”

5. *Connect with the known.* Your story will gather the most believers if it connects listeners with an even greater story they already know.

Where do I find good stories?

Most Bible narratives provide you with the basics: a believable character, a minus, a lot of complexity, a plus, and a celebration. Think about Jonah and his fear of doing God's will. Or the widow of Zarephath, whom God “prepared” to care for Elijah. Or, one of my favorites, the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath and then sent off carrying his bed right into a phalanx of law-enforcing Pharisees. Telling Bible stories is almost too easy.

Then there are the stories you “catch” each week. Remember, narrative sermons require good, constant listening! Listen as you live:

- Read the morning newspaper—in print or online.
- Share a Bible study and breakfast with three good friends every Thursday.
- Read Christian magazines, such as *Adventist World*, other kinds of publications, such as *National Geographic*, and the multiple “begging” letters you receive from charities needing money. They are all treasure troves of stories.
- Turn on the news on your car radio.
- Visit with the community service workers at the food pantry.

Get the idea? The best stories tend to jump out and grab you while you are doing God's work. In addition, bear the following in mind:

- Your family can be a source for sermon stories—but only very carefully.
- Information from your counseling is also off limits—even if you disguise it well.
- Your stories should never be told to make yourself look good. Only God can be the Hero.
- Always give credit to the source of your story.

How will I know if my narrative preaching is working?

An old song says it well: “They'll know we are Christians by our love.” If you first invest time listening to the voice of God and then demonstrate how much you love listening to your church family, God will guide you to speak stories that touch their needs and give them hope. That hope will come through as joy, a deep energy that will infuse church with affirmation, inquiry, and rejoicing.

Meaningful preaching is built upon a foundation of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. Those two, mixed together with equal parts determination and humility, provide a sure voice for God's love to win even the best-armed heart. You will become known as one of God's troubadours, a village storyteller, the voice in the shadows of the campfire. That is a good way to be remembered—as a storyteller. A good storyteller. ▮

For an example of a narrative sermon outline by Richard Duerksen, go to the Practical Pointers column found on page 30 of this issue.



To access the resources mentioned in this article visit ministrymagazine.org/stories or scan this QR code with your smartphone camera.

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- 1 Ryan Mathews and Watts Wacker, *What's Your Story? Storytelling to Move Markets, Audiences, People, and Brands* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2007), 1.
 - 2 Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker: Tales of a Transformed Preacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 14.
 - 3 Miller, *Sermon Maker*, 8.
 - 4 Miller, *Sermon Maker*, 44.
 - 5 Ken Gire, *The Divine Embrace* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 89.
 - 6 Arthur Gordon, *Through Many Windows* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1983), 137, 138.
 - 7 Gordon, *Through Many Windows*, 138.

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The “story” telling and outreach

It was not always that way, but I have a love-hate relationship with evangelism. When I was only eight, my mom and I attended two sets of back-to-back traditional evangelistic meetings, and at the end, two things happened: (1) my mom decided to be baptized, and (2) a few months later, when I got my own Bible, I decided to be an evangelist. Mom helped me mark my Bible for basic Bible studies. I seated my

dolls and stuffed animals in neat rows, and then, with my Bible strategically placed on a cardboard-box pulpit, I preached. That was the beginning.

Thanks to my mom, I developed an interest in mission as well. Every Christmas, she gave me mission storybooks, which I devoured. This led to a determination to become a missionary. The commitment continued into college, where I became a teacher, with a minor in religion.

As the new pastor of the Ubol district in northeast Thailand, I put these two interests from my childhood to the test. I was invited to a nearby village to meet with Buddhist men interested in knowing more about Christianity. Nothing I had studied through years of Adventist Christian schools had really prepared me for how to present the basics of Christianity to someone who had neither any background in the Bible nor any previous knowledge of Jesus or God. I realized that



the proof-text method would not be meaningful to someone who did not know anything about the Bible.

Instead, I chose another traditional starting point—Daniel 2. It's an ancient story involving a king. And a dream. And a mysterious prophecy. And it dates to the time of the Buddha. (Daniel and the Buddha were contemporaries.)

It did not turn out well. The names and dates of the kingdoms had no significance to these Buddhist men, educated to grade 6 or less, living in an isolated Thai village. I realize now that my love-hate relationship with traditional evangelism, at least in non-Christian settings, stems from experiences such as this.

After that encounter, I embarked on a quest: How can God's universal message be given to people who have no common foundation on which to build and may even be resistant? Despite years of false starts and failed attempts, I eventually found in the Bible a new direction that provided answers to my question.

The Bible—God's Storybook

The importance of stories is seen in the composition of the Bible itself. It is 75 percent stories!¹ An additional 15 percent is psalms, proverbs, poetry, and prayers. Together these are the practical, personal, easy-to-remember parts of the biblical record.

In short, the Bible is a record of God's story. The truth about God is revealed in more than seven hundred stories. His dealings with people reveal His character, attributes, and power. These narratives show His dealings with every possible type of person: the chosen people as well as strangers and foreigners; the faithful and unfaithful, repentant and unrepentant. God's story includes everyone. It shows His power to transform anyone, any worldview. The Bible writers were inspired to record each of these pieces of God's story. Some are encouraging. Some seem difficult to understand, even strange. Many are amazing, almost impossible to believe. Each story, however, is only a tiny piece of the big picture of God.

Jesus modeled how to share the good news of the kingdom with those who had hardened their hearts. The early church showed how to evangelize Gentiles who worshiped multiple gods and had no knowledge of the true God. Even the Old Testament provided guidelines of how Israel should witness to "the nations" around them who did not know God.

God's original plan: "Tell My story"

When God called Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, He specified that Abraham and his descendants were chosen especially to bless the *whole world*! As a nation, they were placed at one of the major crossroads of the world so that they could be a light in the darkness, pointing people to the true God. How were they to accomplish this mission?

They were to *live* the message. Their lives, families, values, health, faith, generosity, compassion, laws—all were to bring glory to God and to testify to His greatness, compassion, and power. This would attract "the nations" to the true God (Deut. 4:5–8). Sadly, this did not happen. Their lives were frequently anything but a reflection of the true character of God. They regularly had to be called back to their purpose and reminded of their mission.

"Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of *his salvation* from day to day. Declare *his glory* among the nations, his *marvelous works* among all the peoples!" (Psalm 96:2–4; emphasis added).²

Jesus' method of teaching

Mark and Matthew summarize Jesus' way of teaching very simply. "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable" (Matt. 13:34). Parables. Word pictures. Stories. Indeed, almost everything Jesus taught was through story.

That brings us to the question, Why stories? Stories have universal appeal. Men and women, adults and children, educated and uneducated—everyone is captivated by stories. Author Ellen White wrote: "Parable teaching was popular, and commanded the respect and attention, not only of the Jews, but of the people of other nations. *No more effective method of instruction could He [Jesus] have employed.*"³

In addition, Jesus lived in a predominantly nonliterate society,⁴ and He chose ways of teaching that fit His audience. Literacy rates have risen considerably today; a conservative estimate is that approximately 50 percent of the world's population are either only functionally literate or completely illiterate. In addition, a large portion of the literate population are "oral learners."⁵ Today, as during the time of Christ, the majority of the population learns best through nonprint media, primarily stories.

Stories impact emotions

Jesus used stories because our Creator understood the brain and how people learn. In recent years, brain research has confirmed the power of stories for imparting information as well as being inspiring.⁶ The brain responds differently to a story than it does to abstract (factual) information:

- People *experience* a story. They do not just hear it; they get involved with it. It becomes their story, their experience.
- People experience the same brain activity as the speaker. They enter the pain, joy, or excitement of the speaker with a deeper level of involvement.
- Stories trigger the release of dopamine in the brain, which enables listeners to remember information better. This explains why most of us cannot remember the points of the last sermon we heard but can usually remember the stories that went with it.

Stories transform worldview

Jesus also understood the power of stories to bring transformation at the deepest level—worldview. Worldview is the most powerful part of culture, and even though it is largely subconscious, it controls our beliefs, values, and behaviors. However, because it is subconscious, it is frequently overlooked or ignored.

N. T. Wright states that worldview is constructed from all the stories of our lives.⁷ They define what it means to be human. Subconsciously, they provide answers to the universal questions of life: What is real? Who am I? Where am I? What has gone wrong? What can be done about it?

Each child grows up with a combination of their own life experiences plus all the stories they have been told about life and the universe. Together these frame their worldview. A child growing up in an animistic culture hears stories of the power of spirits or ancestors and the rites and rituals needed to protect him or her from malevolent spirits or ancestors. A child growing up in a secular, atheistic culture encounters information and stories that question anything supernatural and magnify human wisdom and power. Unless replaced, those stories will continue to be a significant part of their lives.

Addressing beliefs and behaviors while leaving the worldview untouched is like putting a bandage on a cancer, hoping it will go away if it cannot be seen. True transformation needs to happen from the inside out. The stories and experiences of the old worldview need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed with alternate stories—God's stories.⁸

Telling God's stories confronts the erroneous aspects of the stories that constitute each worldview.

Jesus told stories “to challenge the existing Jewish worldview and to provide an alternative picture of reality.”⁹ To challenge the erroneous “kingdom worldview” that controlled Jewish thinking and life, Jesus told dozens of parables that began, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” He usually did not explain the parable, neither did He confront their erroneous thinking head-on. Jesus simply told stories and parables, which gradually challenged their worldview at its core.

The apostles and the early church

The apostles and the early church continued this method. In the book of Acts,¹⁰ sermons to the Jews are focused almost entirely on two things: the Messianic prophecies and a retelling of the stories of God's dealings with Israel in the past. The apostles' teaching concluded with stories of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus.

Sermons to Gentile audiences,¹¹ however, were different. The apostles began by taking the audience back to stories of the Creator, who has power over all other gods and who loves everyone equally. Then they introduced Jesus, the God-Man, and His amazing ministry. Even the epistles, the most theological and abstract parts of the New Testament, are filled with references to stories of God's acts as recorded in the Old Testament. The mission movement in the book of Acts was fueled by story, just as Jesus' ministry was.

Pieces of a whole

Years ago, I stood gazing at the Taj Mahal. From a distance I had seen beautiful vines and flowers adorning the walls. Up close, I realized that each design was made up of many individual pieces of precious or semiprecious stones. No one stone was especially beautiful.

Visit www.MinistryMagazine.org/stories to find “Taste and See—Stories of Hope and Faith” that include over 100 Bible Story suggestions and outlines for story-centric discipleship Bible studies. Get guidance on how to ask questions and develop your own story framework. There are Bible story suggestions for various aspects of the disciples' growth, how to have a real experience with Jesus, and how to become His disciple.



No one stone was the whole picture. Together, they created something amazing. And that's how the Bible is. If we want to introduce people to God, what better tool is there than these hundreds of precious gems that together create a clear picture of our awesome God?

Looking back at my experience sitting on a mat in a small home in northeast Thailand, I wish I had realized just how powerful God's story is. And how simple it is to share. Perhaps, like Jesus, I could have told stories that showed the God of Christianity to be compassionate and forgiving (the prodigal son, the good Samaritan) or compassionate and fair (the sheep and the goats) or that showed the God who has power over nature (Jesus calmed the storm). Or with Paul, I could have gone back to the Creation story of the powerful God who provided for all our needs. I wish I had shared God's stories. What better "seeds" could I have planted?

The foundation of the three angels' messages in Revelation 14:6, 7 is simple. Proclaim the everlasting gospel—the good news of God's love. Lead people to revere God, to give Him glory, and to worship the Creator of heaven and earth. The same message that was entrusted to Israel.

If that is the heart of our mission, maybe I do not have a love-hate relationship with evangelism after all. The challenge is to find appropriate ways to share the good news of God's story with each person. Those who do not know God need to be introduced to Him first. They need to learn to trust Him. And worship Him. And give Him glory. Everything else is commentary. ❏

1 John Walsh, "All the Stories of the Bible," bible.org/series/all-stories-bible.

2 Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

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4 Rick Sessoms, *Leading with Story: Cultivating Christ-Centered Leaders in a Storycentric Generation* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 38.

5 *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 54, 2004, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, first page of chapter 1, accessed July 10, 2019, lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf.

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7 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 40.

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9 *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 34.

10 Acts 2:14–40; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 7:1–53; 13:16–41; 17:2, 3; 22:1–21; 24:10–21.

11 Acts 10:34–43; 14:15–17; 17:22–31.

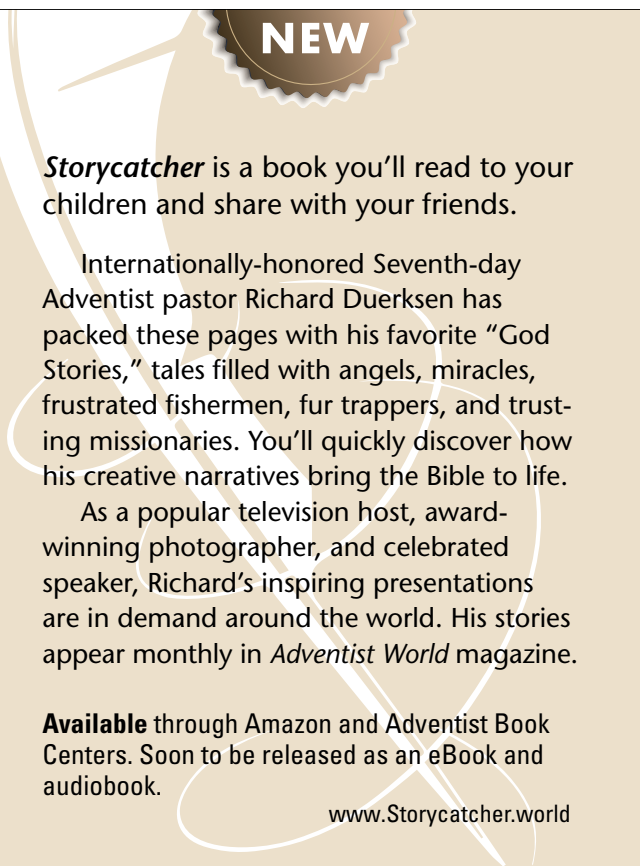


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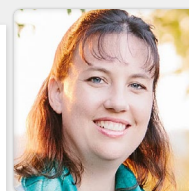
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Narrative changes lives

Whenever I have a chance to travel to Asia, I love to visit temples. It is not to enjoy the peace and serenity, though many temples do tend to be quiet and contemplative. Nor am I attracted to the glitter that some temples boast, evidences of generous donations given to earn merit and good reward. Instead, I go to see the art, specifically the painted temple murals. *Ah, a connoisseur of art*, you might be thinking. But you would be wrong. In fact, I really don't know the first thing about interpreting or appreciating art. Instead, what attracts me is the story that the murals tell.

Often found in the main temple building are intricately painted murals depicting the Buddha's life. Such scenes often include his prior existence in Tushita heaven; magical conception and birth; early indulgent life and marriage; renunciation of his life of luxury; period of asceticism; meditation under the Bodhi tree; enlightenment and first sermon; and finally his death or "*parinirvana*," the entrance into nirvana. It is fascinating to see the many variations portrayed in the stories as well as the differences in their illustration. Some are more artistic while others are much more basic, but all communicate the story in a special way.

I spent several days shadowing some Buddhist nuns. Some, old and widowed, became nuns to earn merit in preparation for their death and supposed next life. They reflected on the Buddha's life stories and emulated his compassion through acts of kindness to better their existence the next time around. Younger nuns came to the temple because they had a character flaw they wished to overcome through meditation and merit-making. These nuns would spend hours sitting in the temple buildings, contemplating the Buddha's life and hoping to gain strength to fight their inner battles. All of them regarded the Buddha's story as important.

Lay people also benefitted from the Buddha story, both as art and as celebrated festivals that commemorate various events in his life. When

asked what the festivals mean to them, participants frequently said that remembering the Buddha's life encourages them to live more generously, less selfishly, and with more self-control.

The power of story

The power of story is undeniable. It moves, motivates, and changes us. While we do not always realize it, one of the reasons we find ourselves drawn to story is because when it is well-written or well-told, when we finish the story, we feel as though we have lived it ourselves. Story invites emotional participation. That is one reason why the Bible is full of stories and why Jesus taught in parables.

The power of story has wonderful implications for mission and ministry. Charles Kraft, a Christian anthropologist, suggests that worldview gets changed two ways: by a new experience or by a new explanation of reality.¹ While we cannot always give our people a new experience of their own, we can help them encounter truth through story.

The difference was story

The information we give, by itself, is not adequate to convince people to change. It is also not effective when working with people from non-Western cultures that are more oral in nature. The tool of story is much more effective. My husband and I encountered this during our 16 years of cross-cultural ministry in South East Asia. It is perhaps best illustrated through story itself.

The first story happened while we supported a church member through the grief and loss of her six-year old granddaughter. Though a Christian, MaeTou's life had been very difficult and full of pain. Her husband had divorced her years earlier after he had fallen in love with another woman. She had poured her life and love into her two children, but as they had grown, their choices further shattered the family. The only thing that gave MaeTou purpose in life was raising her granddaughter.

We met MaeTou and her granddaughter, Joy, during one of her visits to the Adventist church, and we instantly bonded. However, we noticed that Joy was almost always sick. She would either be coughing and have a runny nose or she would have a fever and be lethargic. Doctors eventually discovered that she had thalassemia, a blood disorder that required frequent blood transfusions. The diagnosis overwhelmed MaeTou, so we spent time accompanying her to doctor visits, supporting her through the difficult process of the blood transfusions, and teaching her how to manage the illness at home. Over time, we began to see Joy's health begin to improve. Her weight and height remained below average, but the doctors were hopeful.

Then our family had a call to work in a neighboring country. The move was difficult for MaeTou and Joy who had come to feel that we were family. But others in the church continued to support them.

Several months later we received a phone message saying that Joy was in the hospital. MaeTou and Joy were both asking for us to come. So, we quickly packed a suitcase and made the 10-hour trip

to the hospital. When we arrived, we discovered that Joy was in a coma. Spending much of the night in prayer, we were devastated when the girl died the following day. The next few days were a blur as we helped MaeTou through the wake and funeral before returning home.

We kept in touch with MaeTou who plummeted into a deep hopelessness. Nothing anyone said or did seemed to help. Several months after Joy's death, we invited MaeTou to visit us for a couple weeks. Those two weeks were an emotional roller-coaster. We would study the Bible and pray, asking God to replace her despair with hope. Her spirits would lift, but then something would trigger a memory, and the depression would return. The next day we would spend in Bible study and prayer, helping her claim the promises of heaven, including that of reunion with Joy. Her depression would begin to lift, only to be followed by another dream or memory, and the cycle would repeat. At the end of two weeks all of the studying and praying seemed to have made little difference.

The last weekend before MaeTou returned home, we had a Bible study during our Friday evening family worship about the importance of the Seventh-day Sabbath. But instead of a traditional Bible study, we

*While we cannot
always give our people
a new experience of
their own, we can help
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through story.*



looked at the Sabbath as a story beginning with how God had established it at Creation, telling how the Sabbath was sustained through the Old and New Testaments, and ending with Sabbath in the new earth. We set the story in the metanarrative of the conflict between God and Satan and showed how by observing the Sabbath we are demonstrating our commitment and loyalty to God.

The next day at church my husband felt impressed to share what we had studied the evening before. MaeTou took notes as he preached. After church, she asked if he would go through the story with her again. So, we went through the story once more, this time emphasizing the Sabbath as a sign of our trust that God will fulfill His promise to fix all that is broken and right all that is wrong. Then we ended by spending time thinking about what the new earth might be like and how wonderful it will be to be reunited with Joy again.

The next morning MaeTou woke up a transformed person. Her depression and hopelessness were gone, and she was full of joy and hope. It had taken three tellings, but, having experienced the transforming power of truth in story, she returned home on fire and was eager to relate the story she had learned to others.

MaeTou had heard the texts many times before. All of the information we shared had been a part of the Bible studies she had previously had about the Sabbath. The difference was the story.

Steven Evans, a cross-cultural and oral communications specialist, supports Kraft's theory that experience, even in the form of a story, changes worldview. He says, "it is through processing truth embedded in 'story' in all of its connotations as it touches the very core of one's being that causes one to either consciously or subconsciously evaluate and even question existing worldview issues and change them when deemed beneficial to the individual."² MaeTou, though she had studied about the Sabbath previously, never had a worldview shift until she experienced it in the story. And, by pairing the biblical narrative with her own, the story became even more powerful.

Unfortunately, it seems that we often focus more on giving people new explanations. However, Steven Evans observes that most people are overloaded with information.³ He suggests that we require story to help us make sense of all of the factual and intellectual input so that we can adjust and find our place in the greater metanarrative. In other words, after a certain point, facts without story become useless, instead of creating the worldview and behavior changes we are working for.

So why do we continue to inundate our people with more and more information? Because it is how we have been trained. We have learned to mark our Bibles with studies that advance from verse to verse, book to book, and we are really good at presenting and defending our beliefs with lists of scriptural passages. We have learned to approach Bible study as if we are building a legal case, shoring up arguments and closing loopholes with various explanations and discourse. Such an approach may work well when it comes to black-and-white issues. But when it comes to the gray areas, the topics that do not have a clear "thus saith the Lord," our method falls short.

Finding the Good Power

Another experience that demonstrates the power of story happened with a young business woman we were studying with in Bangkok. Disturbed by the fact that the media, movies, and music focused on negative and dark themes, it seemed clear to Sucheen that an evil power lurked behind it all. "If that is true," she reasoned, "there must also be a good power out there." So, she began a personal quest to find the Good Power. Her search led her to the Adventist church, where we met and began studying the Bible.

Sucheen was eager to study and quickly accepted the truths she learned. But believing that God had chosen the method of dreams to communicate truth to her, she was not willing to regard the Bible as the ultimate authority in her life. It became a real problem when she began having dreams about her future husband. She believed it to be God's indication that she should marry a particular non-Christian man.

At each meeting, we would share Bible texts about not being yoked with unbelievers and passages from Proverbs about the importance of following godly counsel. We presented the story about Saul and the Witch of Endor to help her see that the devil could cause illusions that made things seem real and true. Finally, we even talked about the physiology and psychology of dreaming and suggested that she cut back on spicy food before bedtime! But nothing we said convinced her that she could not trust the dreams and should instead accept the Bible as the only safe authority in her life. She felt that God had chosen dreams as His preferred method of communication with her, and that was that.

Since Sucheen was interested in biblical prophecy, we prepared a short series of studies that took us through the books of Daniel and Revelation. Knowing that she was from an oral culture and would struggle with all the numbers and beasts, we instead looked at the greater metanarrative of the

controversy between God and Satan and showed how the various prophecies fit into it. As we built the story, she began to notice a theme of deception and how Satan had been using it throughout history to entrap humans. In the middle of one of our studies, she sat up straight and exclaimed, “Now I understand why I can’t trust my dreams. Satan is using dreams to deceive me. It all makes sense to me now!”

Like MaeTou, she knew the verses and the arguments from the Bible, because we had studied them with her multiple times. But it was just information that was collecting mental dust. It was not until truth was couched in the metanarrative, the greater story, that the facts and information made sense and she saw her place in it. She had a new experience that challenged her worldview, made sense of the new information she had already received, and led to worldview change.

Finding my story

This is the reason I enjoy temples. Their art helps refocus me, not to be a better person by trying to follow the Buddha’s way, but by reminding me that we also have a story. As with the Buddhist story, ours is also about a man. But our story is not the account of

another human being who made his mark by teaching “a way” that comes from within. Our story is about a God who put aside His divinity to become a Man so that He could dwell among us, to show us that the ultimate solution can never emerge from within us, because our best is still just filthy rags. Our story is of a Man who was tender, compassionate, and kind, but was despised, rejected, and killed. A Man who, because He was God, rose again, conquering death, and is alive today. A God who is intimately knowable and present with us, offering strength and grace to endure all our suffering. A God of a grand and wonderful metanarrative, through which all of life has meaning. And a God whose story needs to be told—through stories. Only that will change hearts and transform worldviews. **V**

- 1 Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).
- 2 Steven A. Evans, “From the Biblical World to the Buddhist Worldview: Using Bible Narratives to Impact at the Heart Level,” in *Communicating Christ Through Story and Song: Orality in Buddhist Contexts*, Paul H. DeNeui, ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 128–150.
- 3 Steven Evans, “Media’s Role in (Re)Shaping the Values of Today’s Urban Buddhist and its Impact on the Gospel Proclamation,” in *Communicating Christ in Asian Cities: Urban Issues in Buddhist Contexts*, Paul DeNeui, ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 41–71.



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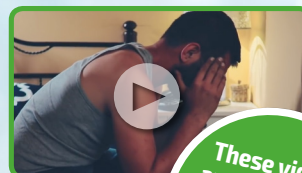
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Sharing our faith with the millennial generation:

The power of storytelling

Nico, have you seen my headset?" I asked my son as I prepared for my work trip. After finishing the normal carry-on-only packing drill, I was looking for the final and indispensable two items: my neck pillow and sound-canceling headphones—old traveling companions for long-distance flights.

"No, Dad. I have no idea where they might be," Nico answered. I could not find them, and I had to leave immediately for the airport.

On my trip to the airport, an image flashed in my mind. A week before, on the returning flight, I had placed my headphones in my seat-front pocket, and, yes, I *myself* had forgotten them.

Since I was now going to the same airport, when I got there, I called the Lost and Found department and told my unfortunate tale to the woman who was on the other end of the line.

"Did you have your name on your headphones?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"Everything we had with no identification was sent to the hub in Houston two days ago. I'm sorry, but it is impossible to find your headphones now. Have a good day, sir."

Did she need to say "impossible"? I wondered. I dialed the frequent-flyer phone number with the naïve expectation that a gentle individual would

answer. Someone picked up. After telling her the whole story—including the "impossible" component I had just heard of—she told me to hold on.

There I was, standing in the corridor by the baggage claim area, now listening to what seemed to be the whole piece *Rhapsody in Blue*. Twice!

Just as I was about to give up, the airline representative asked, "Mr. Gonçalves, what color is your headset?"

"Black!" I replied with no hesitation.

"I'm so sorry, but the only ones I have been able to locate in the system are dark-gray—"

"Well, mine were kind of black. But not *that* black." Then I quickly mentioned the only thing I was really sure about concerning the physical appearance of my headphones: "They have big blue letters *R* and *L* inside the earpads."

"Wait a minute." Then I heard the typical *click-clacking* on a keyboard that airport personnel know how to do so masterfully.

"Where are you right now?" she inquired.

"Outside the Lost and Found office, by the baggage claim area."

"I think I have found your headphones. Please, don't move. An airline employee will meet you right there."

In quasi-disbelief, I stammered, "Wow! Thank you so much for your



help,” and then I hung up. To my despair, two and a half seconds later, I realized I had not asked her name or that of the person supposed to find me!

So, what did I do? I remained exactly where I was—waiting for someone I had never seen in my life who, in turn, had no clue who I was.

Then, in the distance, I saw a woman in a navy-blue uniform coming in my direction with something black (sorry, dark gray!) under her arm. She approached me with a smile and asked: “Are you Mr. Gonçalves?”

I replied, “Yes, that’s me!”

“This is yours,” she said, handing the headphones to me. “I really do not know how we were able to find the owner of something like this with no identification. This is something really special!”

And sure enough, they were my beloved headphones. And there I was, feeling as if I were carrying the one-hundredth sheep in my hands, ready to call my family at home to announce, “Rejoice with me. I have found my lost headset!”

Now, let me ask you a few things. As you were reading my brief account of a real situation, did you imagine some of the scenes as I described them? Did you perhaps remember similar situations you have experienced yourself? Did you want to know whether my story would have a happy ending?

If you had any of those feelings or reactions, you were caught by the power of storytelling.

Storytelling through history

Throughout human history, the use of narrative—stories—has been one of the most crucial elements in our effort to shape life. We have used stories to express how we view ourselves. Furthermore, we regard stories as a communication process deeply connected with our past, present, and future.

That is one of the main reasons that for several hundred years, Western culture was developed upon Christian traditions and guided by God’s actions in human history, as described in the biblical narrative. But not anymore.

With the rise of secular worldviews, historical narratives—including those found in the Bible—have drastically lost their importance in bringing meaning to people’s lives. The secularization of historical

narratives, however, brings even more disturbing consequences in post-Christian cultural contexts. For many, it seems that we no longer have a central narrative able to explain every aspect of human life. On the contrary, many assume that there exist only innumerable contradictory stories, none of them more valid than any other.

Nevertheless, since human beings have a strong sense of curiosity and a deep personal need for meaning, our desire to comprehend the big questions of life has opened the door to new opportunities for the use of storytelling as an effective method in reaching the millennial generation with the eternal gospel. Why? Because life, especially for younger people, is a drama or narrative in itself, in which one of the major problems is to define their identity and find the purpose for their existence. People want to be proud of their lives, to feel they are important. Longing to be connected with others, they want to have their hearts touched at the deepest personal level. Stories can do all these things. That’s why we should turn again to the importance and power of storytelling.¹

The science of storytelling

Scientific studies confirm that storytelling is one of the fundamental instruments of human thought with the power to engage our minds, especially because our existence is organized in time and narrative. In other words, storytelling is a human necessity. Part of who we are depends on the stories we hear and tell.

Findings on the neurobiology of storytelling go even further in helping us understand its power and importance in our lives. A neurochemical called oxytocin is the key player in the process. This powerful hormone regulates social interaction and sexual reproduction, playing a major role in labor and breastfeeding. Our bodies produce it when we face situations that demonstrate trust, kindness, or empathy. As a result, it enhances our ability to experience other people’s emotions and feelings. For instance, when we hug or kiss someone we love, our levels of oxytocin increase.

But what does oxytocin have to do with storytelling? A study led by Dr. Paul J. Zak, and funded by the

US Department of Defense, found a way to “hack” the oxytocin system to motivate individuals to engage in cooperative behaviors” with one another.² Dr. Zak’s team tested how narratives presented in video format, instead of personal contact, could force the brain to produce oxytocin. After drawing blood samples before and after the “narrative experience,” they found that character-driven narratives steadily triggered the synthesis of oxytocin. Additionally, the same study revealed that the amount of oxytocin produced by the brain predicted one’s disposition to engage in sympathetic actions, such as the motivation to contribute to a charitable institution associated with the story watched. In subsequent studies, they found that, to stimulate the longing to assist other people in their needs, a relevant story must first keep the person’s attention through the intentional creation of “tension” in the narrative. If one can capture their attention, the audience will somehow share the same emotions of the characters involved and will most likely desire to emulate the feelings and behaviors they just saw.

In another study, Jennifer Aaker, the General Atlantic Professor of Marketing at Stanford University, discovered that “stories [are] up to 22 times more memorable than facts alone.”³ The experiment gave a group of Stanford students a minute to present a persuasive argument. On average, they included 2.5 statistics in their presentation. Only 1 in 10 told a story. The result? Only 5 percent of those who participated recalled any statistic. At the same time, 60 percent remembered the stories told.

It is hard to argue against the fact that good stories stick in our brain! By the way, which part of the last sermon you heard do you remember?

The art of storytelling

As we have seen so far, study after study confirms what we have instinctively known for millennia: stories have a powerful influence on us. But what is a story? Different definitions abound. Some view it as an experience, a journey, something that deals with tension and conflict. Annette Simmons regards a story as a “reimagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listeners’ imaginations to experience it as real.”⁴ But how exactly can a story be a *really* good one? Communicator Rob Biesenbach presents six key characteristics⁵ of a powerful story:

1. *Good stories touch our emotions.* Somehow, they have the power to captivate and change our

feelings. Appealing narratives spontaneously produce empathy in their audiences.

2. *Good stories put a “face” on an issue.* When we can associate an idea, initiative, dream, or vision with an attractive character, the probability that the message conveyed will reach us becomes much greater.

3. *Good stories connect with our humanity.* Great narratives help us relate with one another in ways that we may not even suspect. Why? They reveal our similarities even in the midst of our differences.

4. *Good stories show who we are.* Our narratives often give us the opportunity to see who we are and what our real value system is, something especially important to those in leadership positions. People are willing to be led by those whom they trust.

5. *Good stories raise the stakes.* Stories have the power to remove us from the daily routine, from the ordinary, and make us aware of a higher sense of our universal, shared values.

6. *Good stories “show,” not just “tell” what to do.* It is always safer and better to demonstrate who we are and what we believe than tell other people about hidden assumptions.

Another crucial aspect of the art of storytelling is the structure that stories should follow. Most people would agree that an engaging story must have a beginning (the setting or context, scene, and characters), a middle (the struggle, problem, or conflict), and an end (the solution, resolution, or answer). Usually, stories follow this pattern, but they also involve much more than just this basic approach. Nevertheless, in a nutshell, the best structures of an irresistible story usually present a character who faces a challenge in pursuit of an objective. How the character tries to resolve that challenge is the driving force behind the narrative.⁶

Why is all this important? Of course, we all love to hear a good story. But those who intentionally learn how to tell moving stories will have the unique ability to touch, inspire, influence, and move other people.⁷ Above all, knowing the basic assumptions, techniques, and structure of powerful stories will help us to present the greatest narrative of all—God’s story, with its power to transform human minds and hearts.

The transforming power of God’s story

To effectively communicate the eternal gospel to the millennial generation, we must develop the ability to think creatively and adapt wisely. In today’s changing cultural environment, new approaches become imperative. To this end, storytelling is even more necessary to effectively encourage decisions

for Christ. Storytelling is a natural bridge to the post-Christian mind.

Younger people place a high value on the power of stories, especially real ones. Storytelling creates experiences that will more effectively address the concerns of human life. It invites those who share such experiences to a real and active involvement in the story told. Thus, experience and storytelling go hand in hand in developing confidence in younger people, something that, in most cases, more traditional forms of communication cannot accomplish.

We should, therefore, provide opportunities that allow individual stories to be compared with and transformed by God's story, the narrative of the Scriptures. This may happen when our churches intentionally assist millennials in understanding the bigger picture of God's actions in history and how it interconnects with their own stories.⁸ When exposed to the biblical narrative in wise and relevant ways, they will be able to see a story larger than their own. They will discover a God who decided to intercede in our story with the purpose of rescuing a lost world.

When God's story begins to challenge the personal and local stories of millennials, it will touch minds that previously rejected cognitive information and facts. Not until post-Christian people can identify the great Storyteller (cf. Matt. 13:34) and align their own story to His purposes can we challenge the underlining assumption, that so many have, that metanarratives are invalid.

By telling God's story, millennial generations can experience the only narrative that transcends and makes sense out of all other stories. It is best to let God's story gain credibility for itself as the Holy Spirit works to bring the millennial heart to the point of serious reflection about the Christian faith.


One thing, though, we must never forget: people do not need more information. What they lack is faith. But they do not know this yet. How can we help them see their need? Narratives are the path to creating this faith. Sharing a meaningful story—especially our own story with God—has the potential to lead our listeners to reach the same conclusions we have arrived at relative to faith and a real relationship with God. Let them evaluate the stories and decide for themselves to accept and believe what we do. But make no mistake, they will only develop faith in what has become real for them. When they make God's story their own, they have started the journey of transformation.

Are we willing to trust millennials, under the power of the Holy Spirit, to think for themselves? Can storytelling not simply be “sermon illustrations”

but the prime approach to explain biblical narrative in meaningful ways? These are serious questions we must be able to answer if the focus of our mission and ministry is indeed to reach the millennial generation for Christ.

By the way, just in case, now I always keep my business card inside my headset cover! 📇

- 1 See Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate With Power and Impact*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: AMACOM, 2015).
- 2 Paul J. Zak, “Why Your Brain Loves Good Stories,” *Harvard Business Review*, October 28, 2014, hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling.
- 3 Jennifer Aaker, “Harnessing the Power of Stories,” Vimeo video, 0:01 of 8:36, accessed July 15, 2019, womensleadership.stanford.edu/stories.
- 4 Simmons, *Best Story*, 22.
- 5 Rob Biesenback, *Unleash the Power of Storytelling: Win Hearts, Change Minds, Get Results* (Evanston, IL: Eastlawn Media, 2018), 15, 16.
- 6 The following resources bring out important aspects of powerful storytelling structures: Akash Karia, *TED Talks Storytelling: 23 Storytelling Techniques From the Best TED Talks* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2006).
- 7 Ty Bennett, *The Power of Storytelling: The Art of Influential Communication* (American Fork, UT: Sound Concepts, 2013), 68.
- 8 Peyton Jones, *Reaching the Unreached: Becoming Raiders of the Lost Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 67.



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Stories: *Unlocking hearts for God*

Serving the Ovahimba people¹ was a transforming experience for me. I was accustomed to doing ministry based on the language of my training: disseminating information. I saw that what I needed was a “universal language”² to share God’s kingdom principles. The apostle Paul declared, “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks” (1 Cor. 1:23, MEV). I discovered that the principles needed would challenge the cultures of both preacher and listener. And I discovered that the language needed—was story. Stories speak to all people—rich or poor, educated or uneducated, male or female, child or adult. They give their listeners an opportunity to respond to their message. Drawing in the hearers, they demonstrate that God connects with their lives. They help their listeners know God vicariously. Jesus chose stories as a tool to engage His audience.

Jesus used parables. Some listened but did not always understand. Stories grant the seeker an opportunity to search deeper and find the application for their lives, but they must choose to respond. If one opens up to them, they can capture the heart. I would like to share four storytelling principles, gleaned from the life of Jesus, that have helped in my cross-cultural communication of the gospel. Used together, these principles can work to transform the listener.

Authenticity

The simple question “How is the work going?” left me ranting for the next five minutes. Very calmly my missionary colleague listened then asked, “Do you love the people?” As if he spoke to a wall, I continued my tirade. A second time he patiently inquired, “Do you love the people?” I ignored the question, thinking to myself, *I was sent to preach the gospel; where does love fit into this scenario?*

Months later, while reading about the history of the Ovahimba, the question played back in my mind: “Do you love the people?” This time I understood the question differently. To communicate effectively, I needed to

care enough to know and understand the people. As a result, I embarked on a journey to be with them, to experience life from their perspective. Being in a new environment, I had to take time to get to know the Ovahimba both as a whole and as individuals.

They needed to know that I understood them and could relate to their circumstances. Above all they did not want to feel like just a project. So, I spent hours with them, working the fields, walking the cattle trails, and learning how to use a stone for a chair. I also had to understand their worldview. For example, I discovered that they regarded illness as a result of breaking a family taboo rather than encountering germs. My eyes opened to the significance of ritual. By learning to love and embrace the Himba world, I was earning the right to be heard.

Authenticity is about being where the people are and connecting with them at a level that says, “I feel your pain and your joy.” It is about empathy and involves seeing people through God’s eyes and learning to live as a Christian in their world. I needed to have the wherewithal to enter the world of my audience with a message they could understand, engage with, and act upon. My focus needed to be fully on the person and his or her needs, not mine. Those were tough mission lessons.

Timing

Jesus, the master Teacher, was authentic. He was present at the right place and time as He followed the Holy Spirit’s leading. Authenticity needs to be coupled with timing. Often we reserve gospel talk for special occasions, such as church or a church-related activity. This tendency makes it appear artificial. Jesus connected with people because He seized every opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those He met.

The story of Zacchaeus demonstrates Jesus’ authenticity. As He walked through Jericho, the crowd pressing Him on all sides, He suddenly, for no apparent reason, stopped. Jesus stood gazing up into a tree at Zacchaeus, the greatest extortioner in

the city. Disappointed, the mob glared at Zacchaeus, *What does he need?* written on their faces.

Inquisitive, yet cautious, Zacchaeus had hidden in a tree to see Jesus. As he saw Jesus coming down the street, he mused to himself, *He looks like just an ordinary person. Is he really the miracle worker?* As this thought whirled through his mind, he heard his name. Embarrassed, he looked down, straight into the eyes of Jesus. Beckoning, Jesus called, "Come down. I want to visit you, now, at your house." Something about those eyes ignited a flicker of hope within him. Zacchaeus recognized that, as a tax collector, his people and the religious leaders despised him. Yet this rabbi wanted to visit him at his house *immediately*. Zacchaeus was not sure, but he was willing to give this teacher he had heard so much about a chance.

Luke does not give us the details of their conversation, but it transformed Zacchaeus from an extortioner into a philanthropist. It was a relevant, knowledgeable discussion that led him to understand God in a totally new way. We find so much in the story that illustrates Jesus' authenticity. Here was a rabbi publicly talking to a tax collector, even willing to eat with him. A rabbi willing to speak about things that mattered to a tax collector. Instead of condemning, He was willing to listen and engage. Authenticity is demonstrating care, love, and empathy. It is being present with someone *in the moment* and guiding them through new ways of being. For Zacchaeus, Jesus was real, honest, and authentic.

Heart language

Narratives come in different forms. We all recall stories from our childhood: Bible stories, fairy tales, rhymes, recitations. Each of these genres uses language differently, has a different tone. But whatever the language used, it resonates with and engages the audience.

When I first arrived in Namibia, I spoke about heaven, the Ten Commandments, salvation, sin, and many other concepts that my audience knew very little about. Christian language got lost in translation, because I did not understand it from my audience's perspective. A simple definition of sin for the Ovahimba was "gossip." I started listening to the language I used. I was speaking to a non-Christian audience employing Christian language with Christian definitions.

While debate, discussion, rhetoric, and other forms of communication have their place, stories connect with the heart of the people.

I went to a village to share another Bible story using a flannel board as a teaching aid. This particular afternoon was no different. A friend accompanied me and took pictures. Finding a stone for a chair, I plopped myself on it and placed my flannel board so that my audience could see it. We all sat under a makeshift shelter. The brightness of the sun and glare off the sand was intense. I started my story: "And God said; 'let there be light. . .'" As I moved through the story, I added the felts as a visual illustration. My friend snapped shots as the story unfolded. In reviewing the photographs, I was struck by the contrast between my visual aid and the background of barrenness. Also I noticed that my audience was more concerned about the picture than the story. The flannel board was not appropriate for them.

As a result, I began experimenting with various storytelling approaches. Through persistence and continued field research I discovered different Himba genres: *omiimbo* (poetry), *ongano* (fairy tales), *ombimbi* (praise song), and others. These, I observed, were the heart language of the people. For it was the uniqueness of the medium, not just the language, that helped communicate a message. The rhyme or the chant allowed the audience to engage more in the subject matter.

When I made my initial cassette with the help of the Lutheran Bible Translators, not only did we tell stories using communication styles familiar to them we also employed language appropriate to the genre that connected with our listeners' hearts. After hearing our first recording, a young Christian leader said, "This is what our people need to learn the gospel." An amazed pastor commented, "I never knew we could use our own music to sing about God."

News of the recording quickly spread. We began seeing an elderly woman waiting at the side of the road, watching for us. By the third week, she finally had the courage to stop our vehicle and ask to listen

to the tape. We had never met before, but she had heard about the recordings and wanted to hear them. Not having any extra cassettes to give her, we listened together as she drank in every word of every story. She loved the story of Isaac and Rebecca. It was the biblical story using Himba wedding imagery and words. From a Himba perspective it was a true love story. Another story that appealed to her was that of Noah. It employed *ombimbi* (praise song). The listener identified Noah as a hero through the genre used, one full of imagery of bravery and endurance, a medium and language they understood. Then it spoke about destruction by water and the restoration after the Flood. This story spoke to the hearts of the people and invited them on a journey of restoration. As we departed, she reminded us to bring her a cassette the next time we passed her village.

Subversive fulfillment

The parable of the prodigal son is used countless times in sharing the power of a father's love. Jesus was responding to an accusation that He "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). As a first-century Palestinian listener, what does this story mean? Honor is a value that is paramount in the New Testament worldview, whether Jew or Greek. In the story, the son shames both the father and wider family by demanding his inheritance. The expected response would be for the father to take his son to the city elders and have him stoned for his rebelliousness (Deut. 21:18-21).


The imagery Jesus uses in the parable is subversive. First, the father actively waits for the son's return. A person of authority does not wait for a disobedient child. The absence of his son should shame the father, but instead he watches expectantly for his son's return. Second, he runs to meet his son. In many traditional societies to do that is a shameful act and demonstrates his weakness as a parent. Third, the son receives a warm embrace and a kiss, something unheard of. Why would the father do such a thing? Welcoming his son honors him and does not deal with the shame the son brought to the family. Thus, this parable challenges the very fabric of its contemporary culture and turns its values on their head.

Hendrik Kraemer recognizes that Jesus, in His behavior and stories, subverts cultural values. He enters the world of the listener to identify with them and their challenges. Then He argues an alternative that meets the real need of the person. Kraemer calls this subversive fulfillment.³ The father gives the son a robe to again make him part of the family. As highest authority in the family, he assures the son of his protection.

Jesus fulfills the need of the audience for restoration and belonging. He answers His critics by demonstrating that the elder son also shames the family by not attending the feast. Once more, the father initiates reconciliation by going to talk to his son. However, Jesus ends the story by allowing His audience to complete it themselves. What will the older son do? Jesus argues that every person has shamed the heavenly Father, but it is the Father who initiates and draws His children back into a relationship. Despite the shame brought to the family by each son, it is the father who restores honor in unconventional ways.

Storytelling allows us to connect with the audience, but unless we are willing to challenge the norms of society, it merely entertains. Christianity is a call to be different. It is a society within a society. We are a holy nation, unique and different from those around us (Exod. 19:5, 6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Hence, our pattern of life cannot imitate the world but should represent the God we serve. In engaging the world, it is important to understand the context but it is through divinely aided wisdom that we can draw new conclusions. That can come about only as we remain rooted in God's kingdom principles. Thus, we must always allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide as we engage the world.

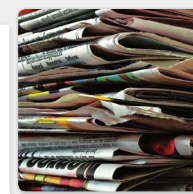
Communication goal

How do we talk about grace when society wants revenge? How do we address the issue of selflessness when greed is rampant? A narrative will make our "foolish" principles palatable. Jesus teaches us to use familiar imagery and genre to illustrate divine principles. While debate, discussion, rhetoric, and other forms of communication have their place, stories connect with the heart of the people and, if we are wise, can subvert a societal value, yet demonstrate how it answers a need. Stories illustrate how to apply the divine principle within a specific context, transforming individuals. It does not mean it is easy to live differently; however, that can be done if we seek wisdom. Our goal in Christian communication is not to entertain but to challenge our audience to live God's kingdom principles in a world opposed to His character. Jesus understood this as His missional task. Today, we need to reset our own task to be effective communicators of the gospel. 

1 The Ovahimba are a people living in northwest Namibia, southern Africa.

2 Jedd Medefind and Erik Lokkesmoe, *The Revolutionary Communicator: Seven Principles Jesus Lived to Impact, Connect and Lead* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Media Group, 2004).

3 Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York, NY: Harper, 1938).



Leading With Story: Cultivating Christ-Centered Leaders in a Storycentric Generation

by Rick Sessoms, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016.

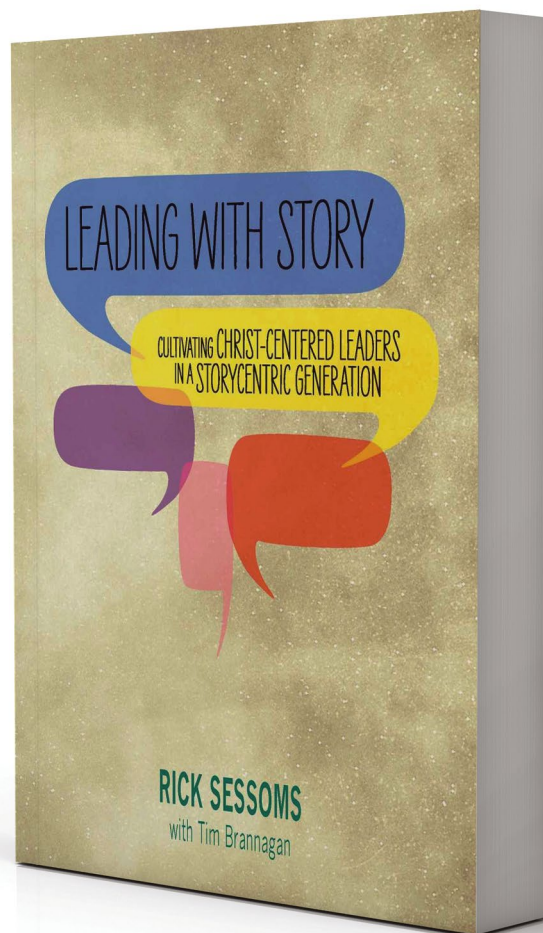
In his introductory chapter, author Rick Sessoms makes the compelling observation that 80 percent of the world's people, including 70 percent of Americans, are story-centric learners and communicators; that is, they prefer to learn and are most likely to be influenced through stories, pictures, drama, and music rather than through reading and writing.

Yet, more than 90 percent of Christian workers communicate through a highly literacy-based approach. This disconnect greatly limits the multiplication of leaders for the growing global churches and veers from the example of Jesus. Through engaging stories, biblical insights, leadership research, field-tested methods, and practical models of effective leadership development, *Leading With Story* offers unique solutions that will inspire and challenge any who want to raise up or to be raised up as Christ-centered leaders in this story-centric generation.

Sessoms's book is primarily about how we can reach those in literate and nonliterate cultures through the training of Christ-centered leaders using story-centric methods to which they can relate. Jesus' primary method of teaching was through the use of stories. The Bible is often referred to as the "Grand Narrative," and it is filled with stories from the opening words in Genesis to the closing of Revelation.

This book intends to equip both practitioners and recipients of leadership development with (1) a grasp of and appreciation for story-centric learning; (2) a comprehensive leadership-development model; (3) an effective leadership-development process; (4) a more precise understanding of Christ-centered leadership; and (5) a field-tested sample of story-centric, Christ-centered leadership development.

This book is divided into four parts. Part 1 examines the topic of story-centric learning and its prominent place in our lives. This section explores the misconceptions that surround story-centric learning, the relationship of literacy and story-centric



learning, and the role of story as a primary guide to living and leadership.

Part 2 addresses leadership development. This section explains the evolution and current state of Christian leadership development, defines the comprehensive scope of leadership development that aims to cultivate Christ-centered leaders, and recommends a proven process for developing effective leaders today.

Part 3 presents Christ-centered leadership by outlining the trends of leadership over the past century, explaining the current state of Christian leadership, and proposing the need for a leadership reformation, following the example of Christ the leader.

Part 4 describes the Garden Project, a pioneer leadership development initiative designed to cultivate Christ-centered leaders in story-centric communities. This section shows how Sessoms's theological and theoretical framework can be applied in practice.



Leading With Story targets several types of readers. It targets church leaders who are committed to raising up other competent ministry leaders to enhance our Christian witness. It reaches those who are cultivating other emerging leaders and are asking, “What are the effective methods for reaching others?” It is also for those who wish to provide leadership development in story-centric communities as well as those who simply want to know how to be a Christ-centered leader.

After 40 years of ministry, I am more convinced than ever before that stories and images are more effective for teaching and life formation than abstract concepts. Jesus modeled this for us in His teachings.

Jesus’ parables are seemingly simple and memorable stories, often with imagery, and all convey deep and practical messages capturing the heart of the teachings of Jesus. Many of His parables refer to simple everyday things, such as a woman baking bread (parable of the leaven), a man knocking on his neighbor’s door at night (parable of the friend at night), or the aftermath of a roadside mugging (parable of the good Samaritan); yet they deal with major religious themes, such as the growth of the kingdom of God, the importance of prayer, and the meaning of love. The beauty about them is that they stick in the mind and move the hearer to a better life.

What makes this book a must-read is its relationship to a methodology for learning and leadership for literate and nonliterate leaders or learners in the West and East and everywhere in-between. Current and traditional teaching and training models must be reconsidered in light of such compelling research and verified practical methods addressed in the book. This is a book every church leader should read who takes seriously the task of reaching every tongue, tribe, and nation. If there is one overriding theme in Sessoms’s book, it is that leadership must always be Christ-centered—that means, it should be patterned after the model of Jesus. 📖

—Reviewed by S. Joseph Kidder, DMin, professor of Christian Ministry and Discipleship, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.

► Inspiring through stories

Sweimeh, Jordan—Each year, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) facilitates two weeks of working group sessions with roughly 200 staff members from its 131 country offices.

A leadership summit kicked off this year’s meetings introducing three pillars of thought for ADRA’s leaders to consider in the coming year, namely, to create clarity, generate energy, and thrive.

Participants were also introduced to an array of workshops and plenary classes. Leading experts and specialists spoke on topics of spirituality, influential leadership, employee relations, diversity, work ethics, and mentoring, to name a few.

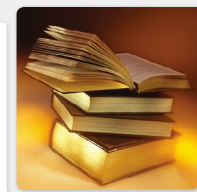
Karla Cole, director of annual giving at ADRA, attended a creative workshop focused on storytelling in which **Bill Knott**, executive editor of the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World* magazines, was the presenter. “I found the storytelling workshop to be a unique way to inspire,” she said.

“Storytelling is as much what the teller says, but also what the listener hears,” Knott said during his storytelling workshop. “A story can be internalized by the hearer to make it his own and be changed by it.” He added that every culture uses stories and that stories have the power to let God speak to each individual and their personal narrative. [Kimi Roux-James/ADRA International News]

To hear Bill Knott explain how to better engage your congregation during sermon time, moving past the days of passive listening, go to “The Interactive Sermon” on the *Ministry in Motion* website, ministryinmotion.tv/episode/the-interactive-sermon/.



Bill Knott



► Sonscreen, stories, and salvation

Columbia, Maryland, United States—The 2019 Sonscreen Film Festival took place April 4–6, 2019, in Riverside, California, United States. The Sonscreen Film Festival, created by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, is an exciting gathering of visual *storytellers*—artists, Christian filmmakers, and all those who have a passion for creating timely and relevant productions. Since its debut in 2002, the festival has become the destination for up-and-coming Christian filmmakers to share their creative work, gain exposure, network with media and film students, and be nurtured by film professionals. It has given young Christian filmmakers the opportunity to share their stories—and the gospel—with others.

Say Sonscreen organizers, “Young people are telling their stories and, therefore, are able to connect with other young people who are also living those stories. That’s what film does. It connects people together through storytelling. The lives of the filmmakers are the content of the films. They’re *their* stories. And one of the most powerful ways to communicate, to connect, is through story.”

Historically, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been at the forefront of using media to engage society and carry out evangelism. The Adventist Church was one of the first Christian denominations to broadcast nationally on radio through the *Voice of Prophecy*. The founder of this program, **H. M. S. Richards**, was a real visionary. One of the first Christian television broadcasts was *Faith for Today*.

Today, we have to compete with the programming on Netflix, on Hulu, HBO, and the like. Many call this time the second golden age of television.

It would behoove the church to use storytelling to create parables—allegories if you will—to connect with this audience. Scripted drama, films, and television programs give us a platform by which we can talk about the gospel in present-day language. We can do this in ways that are real to people who are living through challenges and seeking something, or Someone, beyond themselves. [Kimberly Luste Maran/NAD NewsPoints]

For a sample of award-winning films from past festivals, see “Screening Room” on the Sonscreen Film Festival website, sonscreen.com/screening-room. 📺



2017 Sonscreen Film Festival People's Choice award winners (center)

Photo: Peter Dansteeg



Narrative preaching and teaching: *An assignment*

Regarding the stories of Scripture, Charles Bradford writes, “The narratives have been told and retold, but they never lose their power. One would think that familiarity on the part of the hearers would lessen the effect, that there would be no element of surprise and therefore no suspense (necessary ingredients for storytelling). But when the preacher is completely identified with the message, the scene lives again.”¹

Bradford describes theologian Helmut Thielicke’s experience listening to one of the greats: “When Spurgeon speaks, it is as if the figures of the patriarchs and prophets and apostles were in the auditorium. . . . You hear the rush of the Jordan and the murmuring of the brooks of Siloam; you see the cedars of Lebanon swaying in the wind, hear the clash and tumult of battle between the children of Israel and the Philistines, sense the safety and security of Noah’s ark, suffer the agonies of soul endured by Job and Jeremiah, hear the creak of oars as the disciples strain against the contrary winds, and feel the dread of the terrors of the apocalypse.”²

The assignment below invites us to research, write, and preach a narrative sermon on the night Elijah ran from Queen Jezebel. As your congregation listens to you week after week, may they hear, see, sense, and feel the biblical story, even as Spurgeon’s congregations did.—*Editors.*

This assignment, based on a Bible story, is one of four narrative sermon outlines prepared by Richard Duerksen.³

THE BIBLE STORY

Elijah running from Jezebel (1 Kings 19)

Key thoughts

- HALT. Never make big decisions when Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. Elijah did when experiencing all four—and ran from the threat of danger.
- We all run. Some run from angry queens, others from bad debts, sickness, meaningless jobs, and unhappy families.
- We never run alone. God always runs with us, providing strength, cool water, warm bread, and new jobs.

Research

- Distance and topography from Jezreel to Beersheba
- How to avoid cities on the run
- How marathon runners keep going after “hitting the wall”


Imagine

- Fear
- Running with a friend
- Being abandoned by the friend
- Running alone
- Exhaustion
- Fear (of the angel—who at first looked a lot like one of Jezebel’s warriors)
- Self-incrimination on the walk to Horeb
- Awe at God’s new jobs

Purple passages (phrases that clarify emotions and paint a picture)

- “He was lonely, but not alone. His servant slept beside him, along with the homeless beggars of Jezreel, huddled into the wall for strength.”
- “The next day was the hardest. The pain was greater, the thirst leaving his lips cracked and bleeding, the loneliness adding weights of bronze to his ankles. He didn’t run far.”
- “On the final evening, when he finally slumped into the shade of the peak, he felt at least three days beyond dead.”

Good spots to insert your own stories

- Elijah and his servant running. “We all run . . .”
- Elijah leaving Beersheba alone. “The devil is strongest when we feel alone . . .”
- Elijah’s surprise at the angel’s presence. “When God shows up, He often brings breakfast . . .”
- Elijah, face to the wind, following a trail strewn with fire-seared boulders, following God, walking off toward heaven. “Some of us run many times . . .” 

¹ Charles E. Bradford, *Preaching to the Times: The Preaching Ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1975), 75.

² Bradford, *Preaching*, 75, 76.

³ Find the other narrative sermon outlines by Richard Duerksen at MinistryMagazine.org/stories.

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ALIVE.adventist.org