

CREATING
STORIES
THAT
CONNECT

CREATING STORIES A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO STORYTELLING THAT CONNECT

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Creating Stories That Connect: A Pastor's Guide to Storytelling

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*To my wife,
Connie,
who was the first to believe
I would write a book.*

*To my church family,
New Monmouth Baptist Church,
with deep gratitude for their generous support.*

To the special friends who listened to my stories
as we walked dark valleys together.

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chapter two

Why We Use Stories

We dream, not in bullet points, but in narratives.

—GORDON G. SHAW

STORIES ARE A UNIVERSAL FORM of communication. No matter where we go, no matter what we are talking about, sooner or later a story is going to become part of the conversation. Often the story will be the most memorable and powerful part of the conversation. We all use stories, but we often do not think about why. In this chapter, I want to explain the theory of story usage, why we tell stories, and offer some examples of how leaders in particular use stories.

Six Basic Reasons to Use Stories

My research shows that we tend to use stories for six basic reasons: (1) to explain the unusual, (2) to teach important things, (3) to make things easier to remember, (4) to help solve problems, (5) to help create identity and community, and (6) to allow us to share the experiences of others.

Stories Explain the Unusual

Perhaps the most basic reason we use stories is to explain the unusual. From birth, we are particularly aware of things that are out of the ordinary. Jerome Bruner explains that infants instinctively notice the unusual, and their desire to explain it is probably what pushes them toward speech.

Infants reliably perk up in the presence of the unusual: they look more fixedly, stop sucking, show cardiac deceleration, and so on. It is not surprising, then, that when they begin acquiring language they are much more likely to devote their linguistic efforts to what is unusual in their world. They not only perk up in the presence of, but also gesture toward, vocalize, and finally talk about what is unusual.¹

From the beginning of life, we notice the unusual things around us, and we never grow out of it. In every culture, there is an expected normal behavior. When people behave in a normal way, we do not ask *why*; the behavior is simply taken for granted. However, departures from the ordinary create what Paul Grice calls, “surplus meaning,” and that triggers a search for an explanation, which usually produces a story.² The story produced probably will attempt to explain the unusual and explain why the unusual event “makes sense.” Bruner gives an example:

If somebody comes into the post office, unfurls the Stars and Stripes, and commences to wave it, [the storyteller] will tell you, in response to your puzzled question, that today is probably some national holiday that he himself had forgotten, that the local American Legion post may be having a fundraiser, or even simply that the man with the flag is some kind of nationalistic nut whose imagination has been touched by something in this morning’s tabloid.³

The story will make sense to us if it explains the unusual. Throughout our lives we tell stories to explain things.

Stories Explain Important Things

Stories also are used to explain important things in memorable ways. This may be why we tell stories to our children; we want them to remember what is important. We want them to be faithful like Horton the Elephant, brave like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, and honest like Pinocchio. Stories present information in “easily digestible form.”⁴ In fact, the Hasidim consider stories the best way to teach their children the beliefs and practices of the community.

Stories are equally useful in helping adults remember the important things. David Silver tells how public health workers in Uganda used stories to help people understand illness and avoid disease.⁵ In villages without doctors and hospitals, one of the most common ways for a woman to die is in childbirth. Health workers wanted to help the traditional birth attendants (midwives) identify the mothers who were most at risk in time to send them to the hospital, where higher levels of care were available. At first, the health workers tried to teach the midwives, usually older native women, using lists of symptoms and words like *anemia*, *cephalo-disproportion*, and *malaria* without much success. Someone got the idea to rework the material into a lively story song, loosely translated as follows:

If their eyes are pale, and they're feeling very weak,
to the hospital, to the hospital;
If their hips are small, and they're looking pretty thin,
to the hospital, to the hospital;
If their fever's high, and they're having lots of chills,
to the hospital, to the hospital . . .

With this simple story song, the midwives learned the information and understood it in a way that made it easy to transmit to the rest of the village. Stories teach the important things in simple but powerful ways.

Stories Make Things Easier to Remember

Stories are the way we store our life experiences. Life experiences, and the meaning we attach to those experiences, are not stored in lists of facts or tables of data; they are stored in the form of stories. Our brains organize our experiences and understand what they mean in the form of stories. The stories bring order to our lives. That is why they are so easy to remember. Whenever we hear a story, our minds recognize the opportunity to add order to our lives, to understand something more deeply, so we are instinctively attracted by the story.

Not only are stories the way we organize our own experiences, but they are also the way we usually communicate those experiences to others. When someone asks why we do what we do, we usually provide an explanation in the form of a story. If you asked me, “Why do you iron your own shirts?” I would tell you a story about living with Mrs. McAlmon and doing my own laundry for the first time. I asked her what to do about my wrinkly shirts, and she showed me how to iron them. I might go on to tell how, when my wife went to work and needed help with the household chores, ironing was one of the ways I could help. It was a practical way to show her my appreciation and love. Stories allow us to communicate an experience as well as what we think the experience means. Stories add color and vividness to a particular perspective. The vitality and descriptiveness make stories easy to repeat and remember. The ability to communicate clearly and memorably makes stories powerful.

Stories Help Solve Problems

When someone has a problem and shares the story of that problem with us, we become part of the search for meaning. Any textbook can give us general truth, but when we face a particular person with a

particular problem, we often need a story to connect general truth to a specific solution. Suppose someone begins to tell a story about the funny noise his car is making. We all listen with the memories of the noises our cars have made. His story activates our imaginations by linking our past experiences with his situation. Often that linkage will bring to light a story that may explain the noise.

Physicians do the same sort of thing in the process of diagnosis. During medical school and residency, a physician hears thousands of illness stories that illustrate what a disease looks and sounds like, what might happen as a result of different treatments, and what might go wrong. The stories provide a highly flexible framework for illustrating the lessons of experience and make those lessons easy to remember. A good physician uses the stories he has heard to properly understand the story he is hearing from the patient in front of him. The stories help him understand the problem.

Scientists also use stories to help them understand problems. As they assemble data and try to give it meaning, they inevitably tell stories. Too often they are stories of natural selection and impersonal forces, but the impulse to explain how it all makes sense pushes them into storymaking. Indeed, sometimes a story is the only way to make something understandable to a layperson. I have trouble understanding quantum physics (don't you?), so I was fascinated to read an article by physicist Hans Christian Von Baeyer in which he told several stories with protagonists in quantum situations.⁶ There were the stories of Schrodinger's poor cat, two villainous physicists in Hardy's reprieve, and Vaidman's bead game. These stories helped me understand the extraordinary rules that govern entangled quantum systems. The stories were so odd that I wondered if they were accurate, so I asked a physicist friend of mine to evaluate these stories. Here is part of what he said:

The stories are good but they are only half the story. The other half is the math. To get the full picture you really need both. . . . After all, the stories and metaphors are both (a) incomplete representations of the underlying reality, and (b) overlaid with the potential for inappropriate extensions that do not map to the underlying reality.⁷

I had to smile. My friend was probably right; the math might help, but without the stories most of us would understand nothing at all. Stories help us understand problems.

Stories Create Identity and Community

We form our experience into meaning with stories, and as those stories accumulate, we begin to understand ourselves. We begin to develop a personal identity, a personal story. The same sort of thing happens in a culture. One way to think about culture is to think of it as a group of people who share similar stories. Americans share similar stories of immigrating to this country, working hard, and becoming successful. We share stories of our war for independence and the westward expansion. The stories we share help us understand things in similar ways. Our daily interactions strengthen and reinforce these commonalities.

When you think about it, most of our social interactions are opportunities to tell and retell stories. When a coworker asks, "What's new?" or a parent asks, "What did you learn in Sunday school?" or a spouse asks, "How was your day?" or a doctor asks, "How have you been?" those questions are invitations to tell a story. Sometimes we tell our own story, and sometimes we tell stories about someone else's story, but it is almost always a story that binds us together and makes us one.

Stories are intrinsically relational, because every story involves at least two people, a teller and a listener. Kevin Bradt calls this "the interdependent transaction of storying."⁸ We are familiar with the role of a storyteller, but the listener has an important role as well. A good listener does not simply sit and passively absorb the story; he or she provides a different perspective. As we tell a story, this different perspective is always part of our awareness and consciously or unconsciously influences how we shape

the story. If I told you a story about something that happened at church, it would come out differently than if I told the same story to my wife. The story I told you would need lots more detail and explanation than the story I told my wife, because she knows the church situation and you do not. However, both stories would be fundamentally relational.

As we tell our stories to each other, my meaning becomes part of your meaning, and your meaning becomes part of mine. Our shared understanding brings our individual worlds into closer alignment. This potential alignment prompted Thomas Boomershine, a seminary professor and founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, to affirm the connective value of storytelling:

Storytelling creates community. Persons who tell each other stories become friends. And men and women who know the same stories deeply are bound together in special ways. . . . Good stories get retold and form an ever expanding storytelling network. . . . New connections are established between persons who have heard and identified with the same stories. . . . The deeper the meaning of the story, the deeper are the relationships that are formed by the sharing.⁹

Stories are intrinsically relational. One aspect of their power is the ability to deepen relationships and create community.

Stories Allow Us to Share the Experiences of Others

When we hear a story, the experience described in the story becomes part of our experience, and the meaning becomes part of our wisdom. Through a story, we can imaginatively enter into a very different world, shift to a different viewpoint, and begin to experience what someone else has experienced. One of the amazing things about stories is that they can be real or imaginary without any loss of power. We will never be little pigs, but we can share their experiences—the fear of a hungry enemy outside and the security of a sturdy house. Susan Shaw, in her comprehensive book about storytelling, points out that *Star Wars* resonates with earthbound humans because it deals with common experiences, such as losing one's family, searching for one's identity, and struggling to do good. Shaw goes on to explain:

Identification with a story allows the learners to experience the specifics of a story vicariously. This experience creates space for the learners to learn from the story's experience as if they had actually participated in it—which they have, imaginatively, through the story. Stories, therefore, are an experiential learning process, involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral modes of learning, so that learners participate in stories, reflect on them, understand them, create meaning of them, and act on them. In so doing, learners reorder their own experiences—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—into meaningful patterns and responses.¹⁰

Stories help us to experience vicariously what others have experienced and share the meaning of those experiences.

Stories mediate a specific sort of knowledge—experiential knowledge. Stories are powerful because they allow us to participate in situations that are totally apart from our own experience. In *Tom Sawyer*, we can identify with a young man growing up on the banks of the Mississippi River. In *Star Trek*, we can identify with a spaceship crew going where no man has gone before. In *Harry Potter*, we can identify with a young orphan learning to be a good magician. In *Chicken Little*, we can identify with a paranoid chicken. In *Charlotte's Web*, we can identify with a pregnant spider. This experience is obviously vicarious, but even vicarious experience is experience. Experience creates meaning, and meaning provides the potential for personal transformation.

The same sort of thing happens with biblical stories. Through the prophet Nathan's story, we can enter

into the palace intrigue of ancient Israel. Through the stories of Jesus, we can enter into first-century Palestine and identify with widows, farmers, and Samaritans. Lynne Tirrell believes that this ability to experience “sentiments not our own” is one of the most significant ways that stories help us to develop morally. “Through telling and listening to stories, we learn to make subtle and not so subtle shifts in point of view, and these shifts are crucial to developing the sense of self and other so necessary to moral agency.”¹¹ Stories allow us to make these shifts in point of view and to vicariously experience situations that are totally outside of our reality.

Why Leaders Use Stories

Everyone uses stories, but leaders have particular impact when they use stories. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that the most effective leaders are those who tell lots of stories.

Jesus Used Stories

Part of what made Jesus such an effective teacher and leader were the stories he told. Jesus lived in a largely oral society (some estimates suggest that only five percent of his hearers were literate), so stories were a familiar way to learn and impart knowledge. When Jesus wanted to make a point, he didn’t give a lecture; he told a story.¹² Jesus told stories for the same reasons we have seen already—because they are a powerful way to convey a message, they are easy to remember, they create unity around what is important, and they inspire. The characters and situations in the stories were familiar to his audiences: only the insights were unusual. Jesus used these ministry stories so extensively that Mark observed, “He did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Mark 4:34).

The Church Uses Stories

Given that the Lord of the church loved stories, it does not surprise us to recognize that stories had a profound role in forming the church. In the beginning, there were no written texts—no Gospels, no Epistles. Instead, the apostles and other eyewitnesses told what they had seen. They shared their experiences and formed meaning. In other words, they told stories, true stories, which were collected and written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luke explains the process in the introduction to his gospel:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

In the progressive revelation of Scripture, the story of Jesus became the latest, best part of God’s story, the Bible.

Story is a particularly effective way of conveying profound insight, which has led some to insist that the gospel had to be conveyed in the form of a story. Frederick Borsch, professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, suggests, “Story offers a way of talking about what otherwise cannot fully be brought to expression.”¹³ Borsch explains that the stories in the Bible are the best way, and sometimes the only way, to reflect on the meaning of the mystery of God’s presence. Susan Shaw develops this same idea by suggesting that even theology “is a reflection upon religious experiences that are first expressed in narrative form.”¹⁴ She points out that theology may systematize and organize the material in the stories, but the system and the organization can never be completely detached from the

underlying narrative. She concludes, “Theological ideas are always tied to religious stories.”¹⁵

Don Dent, writing from a missionary’s perspective, believes that evangelism is most appealing and effective when it is done with stories.

Stories are loved in all societies. However, our literate, Western, evangelical heritage has often summarized the message of salvation into short statements of propositional truth. Though true, they have little appeal to many of the world’s people. Even in the U.S., many people are more open [to] and more deeply impacted by stories. This is even truer of oral learners and functionally illiterate people who make up a large percentage of the world’s population. Telling a series of Bible stories involves people over time and leads them step-by-step to the Savior.¹⁶

Stories make evangelism more attractive and effective. They form the foundation of our theology and are the building blocks of God’s revelation.

Business Leaders Use Stories

A growing body of evidence suggests that business leaders also are more effective if they tell stories. Sheldon Buckler and Karen Zien conducted extensive research on mature, innovative companies and were surprised at how extensively stories were used by the most effective leaders. Buckler and Zien reported that they found four types of leaders in these companies. The first type had no stories, only business plans and numerical goals. These leaders were clear enough, but their style had no “soul.” The second type told old stories about “the good old days.” These leaders made the history come alive, but their stories made most people feel left out because they had not been present to be part of those stories. The third type of leader, “the innovative leader,” shaped the old stories to fit the existing situation and showed how the past could inspire the future. This was a very effective way to use stories. The fourth type of leader, “the transformational leader,” invented, embodied, and continually reformed new stories about new futures. This was the most powerful way that leaders used stories.¹⁷ Transformational leaders used stories to explain what was important and to create unity and common purpose. The results of their research led Buckler and Zien to offer this clear advice to leaders: “Tell these stories everywhere . . . in staff meetings, individual interviews and conversations, corporate events, and outside speaking engagements.”¹⁸

Effective Church Leaders Use Stories

Prominent church leaders echo Buckler and Zien’s advice. Leith Anderson advises pastors to “keep a list of blessings and successes. Thank God for them on a regular basis. Tell and retell these stories in the church. It is a necessary spiritual discipline.”¹⁹ Henry and Richard Blackaby observe, “Wise leaders continually help their people see how God is working in their midst. Leaders can do this by telling stories—true stories of how God has worked in the past and how God is working at present.”²⁰ The stories help people understand what is important. Erwin McManus enthusiastically affirms the role of story in the life of the church: “The stories you choose to tell inform the emerging culture. Stories that are rooted in the life of the congregation breathe life into the congregation. Great leaders are great storytellers. Great churches have great stories. Great stories create a great future.”²¹

To create this “great future,” leaders must intentionally accept the role of storyteller. Blackaby and Blackaby remind us, “The leader is a symbol as well as a ‘keeper of the stories’ concerning what God has been doing in that organization. It is said that revival is spread on the wings of the testimonies of those whose lives have been changed in revival. The leader is both the messenger and the message.”²²

Stories emphasize the empowering parts of the past and bring them into the present in a way that creates a common understanding of what the ministry or business is all about. Tom Steffen goes so far as

to suggest that the best way to understand a church is to collect the stories they tell. “From the collective *stories* of people the *story* (characterization) of the church will emerge. . . . [This characterization]—usually deliberate in nature—distinguishes a church’s traits and disposition.”²³

The recitation of corporate stories is an effective way to incorporate new members. In the church, Blackaby and Blackaby suggest, this is most effectively done by telling four types of stories: stories about the church members, stories about the organization’s history, stories about the values of the organization, and stories about the culture of the organization.²⁴ Erwin McManus gives a testimony about how this works:

I also began to realize that whenever I affirmed someone through a story, it helped shape the culture. If I told stories of the secret servanthood of members in the body, it inspired everyone else to serve. When I celebrated sacrificial giving by individuals, it inspired others to give sacrificially. The power of blessing that the Bible talks about is something very real and very important. A part of spiritual leadership is rewarding those things that Christ would reward, blessing those who are reflecting Christ, and inspiring everyone to follow that example.²⁵

Excellent pastors, like Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, seem to inspire people almost instinctively. Notice how the following story reflects and reinforces the values of Willow Creek.

I had just finished presenting my weekend message at Willow and I was standing in the bullpen, talking to people. A young married couple approached me, placed a blanketed bundle in my arms, and asked me to pray for their baby.

As I asked what the baby’s name was, the mother pulled back the blanket that had covered the infant’s face. I felt my knees begin to buckle. I thought I was going to faint. Had the father not steadied me I may well have keeled over. In my arms was the most horribly deformed baby I had ever seen. The whole center of her tiny face was caved in. How she kept breathing I will never know.

All I could say was, “Oh my . . . oh my . . . oh my.”

“Her name is Emily,” said the mother. “We’ve been told she has about six weeks to live,” added the father. “We would like you to pray that before she dies she will know and feel our love.”

Barely able to mouth the words, I whispered, “Let’s pray.” Together we prayed for Emily. Oh, did we pray. As I handed her back to her parents I asked, “Is there anything we can do for you, any way that we as a church can serve you during this time?”

The father responded with words that still amaze me. He said, “Bill, we’re okay. Really we are. We’ve been in a loving small group for years. Our group members knew that this pregnancy had complications. They were at our house the night we learned the news, and they were at the hospital when Emily was delivered. They helped us absorb the reality of the whole thing. They even cleaned our house and fixed our meals when we brought her home. They pray for us constantly and call us several times every day. They’re even helping us plan Emily’s funeral.”

Just then three other couples stepped forward and surrounded Emily and her parents. “We always attend church together as a group,” said one of the group members.

It was a picture I will carry to my grave, a tight-knit huddle of loving brothers and sisters doing their best to soften one of the cruelest blows life can throw. After a group prayer, they all walked up the side aisle toward our lobby.²⁶

Stories are used by leaders to emphasize what is important. When they do that well, they create a unified community.

Looking Back

All of us use stories to explain the unusual, clarify the important, remember the necessary, solve problems, create and strengthen community, and share each other's experiences. The most effective leaders use stories. Jesus used stories; the church, modern business leaders, and effective pastors do so as well. When leaders use stories effectively, they inspire and unify their communities.

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