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HAVE I GOT A STORY FOR YOU:
THE NARRATIVE FACTOR IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Introduction

The story form is a cultural universal. Every culture perpetuates its identity in the stories it tells. Similarly individuals in the process of meaning making, are all writing their own living stories as they experience their world. Storytelling then is a living context for meaning making. We cannot live without stories. They raise profound questions and shape the landscape of our minds for the whole of our lives. This essay argues that Christians have the greatest story that can be told. As teachers we have the potential to tell it well. If we do, our students will not only be encultured in developing their Christian faith but they will also become skilled story tellers whose lives bear witness to the gospel. It is important that Christian educators understand the centrality of narrative in education and faith development. In the past we have overly emphasised systematic theology which engages the intellect, and have neglected storytelling which engages the heart and indeed the whole person. This essay explores ways that teachers can use narrative to help children develop a personal Christian world view to transform the quality of their lives. It also examines the history, purposes, challenges and techniques that affect the successful use of narrative in Christian schools.

The History of Narrative

For the purpose of this essay, narrative will be defined as the "recounting of one or more real or fictional events by someone (a narrator) to someone else (a narratee)" (Prince 1989, p164). Story will be used when describing the oral telling of the narrative. The case for sharing stories is as old as language itself. Gossip that was memorable became folktales. When the supernatural was included they became fairytales or myths. Each culture passed on the essence of their identity by encapsulating their history, beliefs and values in their oral tradition. For the Hebrews it was

commanded by Moses as one of their primary responsibilities that they learn and tell the stories of their deliverance from Egypt and entry into the promised land. Moses even anticipated the parents "When?" question by instructing that "you shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise " (Deuteronomy 6:3-7). In other words, a Jewish parent was expected to tell the stories all the time: major celebrations, mealtimes, bedtime, morning, going and coming, and working.

Levi Strauss (1970), in claiming that everyone everywhere enjoys a story, went on to argue that the story form "reflects a fundamental structure of our minds". (Egan, 1986 p.2) For centuries classical education was centred in narratives as students learned the ancient stories. Since the 1960s, there has been a diminution of the importance of history and especially in the emphasis on history as narrative. In the USA this coincided with the 1960s race riots, opposition to the Vietnam war and the demands of feminists and marginalised people who felt their culture was exploiting them. As the fabric of American society was shaken, educational gurus and curriculum designers collapsed Geography and History into a new Social Science package where the emphasis was placed on teaching sociology for the purpose of social engineering. Many European countries such as West Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden followed America's example. De Keyser, (1994) writes that as a result of the heavy emphasis on skills (skillology) in social studies, storytelling fell into disuse but is being revived as a valuable learning activity" (p.2623). Similarly, in the 1960s in many primary schools, history was withdrawn as a subject as the effect of Piaget's theory took hold. Educators argued that young children lacked the ability to understand abstract concepts, for example, they could not comprehend the concepts of chronological time and causality that make history meaningful. In one state of Australia this meant that the following ten famous people, Jenner, Pasteur, Lister, Hillary, Livingstone, Marconi, Bell, Morse, The Wright Brothers, and Plimsol who were part of the Grade 6 syllabus, were no longer studied (South Australian Department of School

Education (1960). Egan (1986) sees the demise of history in the primary school as regrettable (p.14). He claims primary school aged children have the conceptual tools to understand narratives and in so doing learn and feel profound things about our past. The dominant model of modernism in education emphasised the cognitive empirical domains which Iheoma (1993, p.48) described as "the process of inculcating rationality", and the affective which lies at the heart of story telling was neglected.

The Challenge of the Dominant Cultures

Elkind (1997) argues that modernity was built on three assumptions; progress, universality and regularity. Progress could be demonstrated in the social domain as individuals moved from feudalism to individual freedom and democracy. Experimental science, from its inception in the 16th century, became the model for the modern conception of progress which promised the good life for all. Further, nature was assumed to operate according to universal laws that were regular. Educational psychology consequently posited universal laws of learning, intelligence testing demonstrated children's supposed intellectual abilities, and many children's learning disorders were explained according to the developmental levels notion of causality.

Postmodernism arose as a critique of the above overly idealistic and romantic educational views. Postmodernists quickly identified that with the world's recent history of genocide, environmental degradation and urban crime, such as the horrifying killing of four-year-old James Bulger by two children little older that himself, it is impossible for them to perceive of society as being necessarily progressive (Gooderham 1997, p.59). Their focus gave impetus to an awareness of difference. They attacked exclusiveness and the marginalisation of individuals and groups while arguing against the metaphysical idea of a universal human nature. Their insistence on inclusivity and randomness led to particularity and irregularity being acknowledged in education. Ideas such as allowing for

differences in learning style and using individual subject teaching strategies are beginning to be used. Elkind (1997, p245) even claims that our foremost educational innovators such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori were already quite postmodern.

As previously argued, narrative is a cultural universal. Middleton and Walsh (1995) state that:

> . . . humans constitutionally need metanarratives. We require some overarching framework that makes sense of the totality of life and that gives meaning to our place in the grand scheme of things. (p.76)

While postmodern diagnosis argues that even local narratives can legitimate violence, the term postmodern in itself implies a stage that we live in after a modernity stage and as Best and Kellner (1991) point out "presupposes a master narrative, a totalising perspective " of its own. Middleton and Walsh (1995) label it a "postmodern smorgasbord with its multiplicity of world views offered for our consumption." (p.76). They quote Anderson's (1990) optimistic exhortation that "lacking absolutes we will have to encounter one another as people with different information, different stories, different visions – and trust the outcome" (Middleton and Walsh 1995, p.77). The tragedy is that while postmodernism calls into question the "claims of all other stories and traditions it does not itself have the resources to enable us to live with integrity and hope in a postmodern world." (p.78)

Answering the Challenge

The postmodernist charge that the biblical metanarrative promotes violence and totalisation can be refuted. Bible stories are designed to disclose aspects of our redeemed relationship to God and to each other. John Shea (1980) states:

> The stories of Scripture were remembered and today remain memorable because they are similar enough to our own lives for us to see ourselves, yet different enough from our lives for us to see new possibilities (p.89).

In parables such as the Prodigal Son, our wrong centering is exposed. Matthew's gospel in the parable of the last hired servant uncovers our competitiveness and envy, inviting fraternity. Others demonstrate instead our need to hoard and the tendency to exclude. In so doing they invite us to share and be inclusive. Bausch (1984,pp.129-136) shows how Jesus deliberately debunks human assumptions such as foreigners cannot be trusted, God works on the merit system, correct liturgy wins approval and life is about security. He uncovers our timidity and invites us to risk all for the sake of His Kingdom. He also exposes postmodernism's self-centred despair and distress, inviting all those who are anxious to find freedom and empowerment in the gospel narrative.

The Need for a Reemphasis on Narrative

Bausch (1984) claims storytelling is overdue for a revival. It is time for Christian educators "to challenge the stultifying TV images " which Saines (1993) sees as impersonal by finding new personal imaginative ways of telling the story of God. This will present a significant challenge as demonstrated by a 1997, 23 country UNESCO study which found that 93% of students who attend school and live in electrified urban or rural areas have regular access to television and watch it for an average of three hours per day (Groebel 1998, p.4). However, in society at large and in schools in particular, evidence is emerging that there has been a renewal of interest in traditional values. Story telling can engage the mind and through a savouring of words invite the hearer to experience, explore and accept personal values. For example, Cheney (1991) seeks to restore the place of history narratives when she writes:

> But what of the other kind of story, the kind that opens our eyes, wakes us up to the fact that we are part of a continuity extending through time? What happens when these stories are neglected? Let me suggest there are grave consequences when we fail to awaken the time binding capacity in the young. People who grow up without a sense of how yesterday has affected today are unlikely to have a sense of how today affects tomorrow. They are unlikely to understand in a bone-deep way how the decisions they make now will affect their future (Kilpatrick, 1992, p.196).

Reasons for Telling Stories

Wenders (1993) observes that:

> stories are exciting; they are powerful and important for mankind. They give people what they want on a very profound level – more than merely amusement or entertainment or suspense.....they are incredibly important to our survival. Their artificial structure helps us to overcome our worst fears. By producing coherence, stories make life bearable. (Erricker 1995, p.96).

Stories and storytelling are the vehicles for rich reflection on our experiences. They provide a way to see ourselves; to offer hope, joy, counsel or comfort. We stand in the shoes of others taking risks, suffering, sorrowing, laughing, wondering, feeling satisfied and tuning in to the wisdom inherent in the story. Stories can give us a deep symbolic understanding of reality. They are a mirror that lets the listener see the story, the storyteller and themselves. For children particularly, stories give a form to what happened, they help them order their experiences giving reassurance to their own inner stories and allowing them to accommodate their fears and curiosities. Parks, (1986) points out that life asks us all to experience pain, shipwreck and loss. If we have understood the symbolic meanings stories offer, then inner feelings of loss, sorrow and weakness can be dealt with. Stories can provide a bank of meaningful "for instances" that assure us that life will go on, "that we will make the shore." (Parks, 1986, p. 24)

Baker A. and Green E. (1977), Cole (1989), Donze (1985) suggest the following reasons for telling stories. To:

Share pleasure

This can be seen in the stories words, characters, events and feelings. It is a leisurely abandonment to the now. There is no rush, no hurry, just a peaceful and total awareness of the present, a soothing of our soul. Donze (1985) reminds us that "even though religion teachers tell the story to get across religious truth this should in no way detract from the joy in the story itself" (p.17)

Inspire us to action

They set up ideals. In the binary value opposites, of every story's problem resolution e.g. good versus bad, bravery versus cowardice, humility versus pride, we get the opportunity to choose to live in a noble way. We want to be like the good Samaritan when his acceptance, compassion and altruism are shown to us. They act then as a source of self revelation challenging us to identify our weakness and choose for example to be less selfish.

Nourish the imagination

Bettelheim (1976) considers the stimulation of imagination to be as important as enriching life, developing intellect and clarifying emotions (p.5). Donze (1985) sees it as regrettable that the highly developed imagination of childhood fades. Stories can bring the imagination back into play. Iheoma (1993) argues that "the neglect of imagination in contemporary education is fundamentally due to an inadequate conception of education as well as an inadequate conception of imagination itself" (p.49). He opposes the "inculcating of rationality" definition of education as too narrow and wants imagination retained because it is part of our nature. He argues that:

> Imagination, therefore, is not an irrational faculty of the mind which masks the truth and deceives us by the fictions which it creates. The imagination is rather an essential element of the human mind, inextricably involved with other elements of human consciousness in the complex process of acquiring knowledge of ourselves and our world. (p.51)

Egan (1986) has taken up the challenge of combating the dominant mechanistic way of thinking about planning teaching. By using a stories-based curriculum he takes the binary opposites that capture the importance of a topic, for example, in a mathematics topic on the decimal system it could be a contrasting of ingenuity versus cluelessness (p.79) or in a social studies lesson on communism it could be equality versus freedom (p.67). He then uses imaginative content in a story form to resolve or explain the binary opposites.

Egan's (1986) five step model for teaching as storytelling involves:

1. Identifying importance:

   What is most important about this topic?

   Why should it matter to children?

   What is affectively engaging about it?

2. Finding binary opposites:

   What powerful binary opposites best catch the importance of the topic?

3. Organising content into story form:

   What content most dramatically embodies the binary opposites, in order to provide access to the topic?

   What content best articulates the topic into a developing story form?

4. Conclusion:

   What is the best way of resolving the dramatic conflict inherent in the binary opposites?

   What degree of mediation of those opposites is appropriate to seek.

5. Evaluation:

   How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped and the content learned?

He argues that "if children can see a particular mathematical computation not simply as a dehumanised skill to be mastered but rather as a solution to a particular human hope, intention, fear, or whatever, then we can embed the skill in a context that is meaningful". (p.77) In Egan (1986 pp. 78-86) he illustrates how after having learned the simple integers, 10s and 100s may be taught by using an imaginative story. After deciding that the wonder, magic and ingenuity of the decimal system were central the binary opposites of ingenuity and cluelessness were chosen. His story involved the King of Madagascar who long ago wanted to know how many soldiers were in his army. He chose five clueless counsellors and one ingenious counsellor to count the army who were

gathered on a plain. These people did not have complicated ways of counting and they needed a matching method. The five clueless counsellors wandered ineffectually but gave up. And that's when the king said "Can you count them?" to the ingenious counsellor. He had the five clueless counsellors find ten small pebbles.

> "He then had them stand in a line beside a narrow space between two rocks at the side of the plain where the army was gathered. A table was put in front of them and a bowl in front of each clueless counsellor. The army was then ordered to march one by one between the rocks. As each soldier went by, the first counsellor put one pebble into his bowl. Once he had counted ten, he picked up the ten pebbles again. Each time he picked up the ten pebbles, the counsellor next to him put one pebble into his bowl. So after ten soldiers went by there were no pebbles in the first bowl and one in the second. When the first counsellor had picked up his set of pebbles ten times there were ten stones in the second counsellor's bowl. Similarly, once all his ten pebbles were down he picked them up again. As he picked them up, the third counsellor put one pebble into his bowl. After the third counsellor had put down all his pebbles and picked them up, the fourth counsellor put one of his pebbles into his bowl. And so on.
>
> And so they went on through the morning as the soldiers trooped rapidly between the stones. After some hours they had all passed through. The fifth counsellor had 1 pebble in his bowl, the fourth 3, the third 8, the second 6 and the first 7. So there were exactly 13,867 soldiers in the army. By ingenuity the king's clever counsellor had counted the whole army with just fifty pebbles. (p.82).

An evaluation of such a lesson could involve letting children use marbles as in the story, to count the class, or computer generated beeps.

Evaluation often takes a similar form to present evaluation methods, however it also must include the following aspect of wonder.

Develop and retain our sense of wonder

Stories are the perfect vehicle for examining our shared human existence and the curiosity and wonder which attention to it prompts. They challenge us in an indirect way to answer the world view questions Where are we? Who are we? How am I to live? (Middleton and Walsh 1995, p.63). The Gospel stories should leave us awestruck as we think of what God's love has done for us in the incarnation, life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Develop thinking skills

They teach us to follow actions and formulate hypotheses. They raise questions and challenge us to creatively look at issues and solutions. Egan (1986), in advocating his 'Great stories of the world curriculum', claims that elementary school children, "in coming to make sense of increasingly sophisticated stories, come of necessity to develop an increasingly subtle sense of causality." (p.85). In working through the stories, children's thinking capabilities improve, and their vocabulary, reading and speaking abilities are enhanced.

Nurture our sense of humour

Branson (1998) argues that in the stories and poems of Scripture we can identify the laughter of play, comedy and joy. Our human limitations and foibles are exposed in these stories and we can juxtapose the foolishness we exhibit with the joy that is engendered by God's redemptive act. In our swapping of amusing human experiences we open ourselves to be better understood as we share our common foibles. By laughing together, we draw strength for the Christian journey.

Point us to the Word

Bar – Efrat (1989) points out that over one third of the Hebrew Bible consists of narratives. These along with the New Testament narratives all tell us what God is like and how He takes care of the sin problem through the incarnation of His Word, Jesus Christ. Storytelling engages the heart and is the first and best expression of Christ. Systematic theology which engages the intellect is a later reflection on the Christ story. The powerful effect of telling the story of Jesus in an experiential context is just as real today as it was in the time of the early apostles. We should model the sharing of what Jesus has done in our lives and experiences and encourage our students to also tell stories of their encounters with Christ.

Choosing Stories to use in Christian Schools.

When choosing stories the above purposes should be kept in mind. Stories need to be chosen according to the developmental needs of the children we are teaching. The 1-4 year old stage is likely to be a sensory one which demands actions, visuals, and rhythmic patterns. The 4-7 year old stage involves intuitive thinking where children make intuitive guesses about their world and stories are ways of helping their inquisitive minds give a reality check to their thinking. The 7-10 year old period is characterised by imaginative thinking. They are between a realistic and symbolic way of viewing the world. Here they enjoy real adventure stories. The 10-13 year old period could be said to be an heroic stage. Their energy makes them self reliant, adventurous lovers of the outdoors. At this stage they seek to imitate heroes and need a rich diet of Biblical, imaginative and real life models. The earliteen stage is characterised first by a romanticised view of the world followed by a search for identity. The struggles of others to answer the high demands of their idealised selves gets a positive response in early adolescence. Questions of identity achievement such as what constitutes loyalty, love, friendship and a coherent way of living with a Christian world view can be addressed in shared narratives.

Very young children have difficulty trying to make word pictures as stories are told, so the use of books, flannel graph, overhead projections, slides, sketch and tell, finger games, songs, repetition, rhythm, rhyme and actions will help guide your choices. Being egocentric, they enjoy their own stories, accounts of events which involve them and the people they know. They appreciate familiar details. When we put the familiar into story form we offer a new interpretation – we help children to structure the events of their own lives. They particularly enjoy stories about children in the Bible, such as baby Moses or baby Jesus. They also enjoy those that involve their world, such as shopping, helping mother, pets and family life, for example, Billy's Birthday Cake. Make-believe stories that are appropriate, such as 'The Ugly Duckling' or as children get a little older, C.S. Lewis' "Narnia"

series, allow for children to exercise their already powerful imagination to enjoy the flow of the story and learn the hidden truths that we all will feel lonely and rejected at some time but that when we belong to Aslan the King we are safe and dearly loved. It is very important to establish the primacy of Biblical storytelling. Stories from suitable texts such as Degering's (1977) "My Bible Friends" should be constantly read and reread.

Kindergarten and primary school age children like being read to but they particularly enjoy being told stories. Donze (1985) worries that a read story is "in danger of reaching the listeners without first passing through the heart of the story teller" (p.10). This is in line with her belief that teachers should approach the stories they tell with "an acceptance and reverence that allows their own hearts to be changed before they attempt to use the stories with children" (p.9). Children in this age group also enjoy stories that allow them to be involved in the action with, for example, filling in words or sounds when you say appropriate words in the story. Acting out the Biblical narratives as they read or tell their impromptu parts can also enhance children's awareness and responses. Children's desire to be involved can often be seen in the way they spontaneously help the story-teller repeat the repetitive phrases.

Stories should be chosen for the Biblical truths they teach, the moral and character development they suggest, the way they enhance imagination and learning and for the delight and pleasure that they give. Egan's (1986) use of binary opposites and imaginative problem posing via narratives can be used throughout all the curriculum and particularly in Bible teaching. It enhances affective responses to the Bible as students, for example, get to see the religiosity of the Pharisee juxtaposed against the practical altruism of the unbelieving Samaritan. This story, told from the Pharisee's perspective so that it almost sounds reasonable to walk on by, will challenge the responses that our students make.

In selecting any story to tell it is important that they first resonate with our integration of faith and learning objective. Palmer (1993) reminds us that spirituality in education is not about dictating ends but rather about

> "clarifying the inner sources of teaching and learning, ridding us of the toxins that poison our hearts and minds.....It will root out our fears of having our ignorance exposed and our orthodoxies challenged. (p.11)."

This implies that in using the narratives we will have an ultimate objective to speak, listen, share and live as a rich community of truth where we are accountable to the claims of the gospel.

Finding suitable stories is not as difficult as it seems. It is the telling of them in imaginative and compelling ways that requires our best efforts. Sources that I have used include Scripture story books; magazines - especially those that have quality stories, such as Readers Digest; young people's Annuals (again Readers Digest annuals and story books are excellent); listening to friends and family particularly the older people; listening to the stories that children share; thinking about the stories of my life; making up an imaginative story; taking the opportunity to listen to good storytellers; and keeping a notebook. While there are specific books that have been designed to provide examples of character building morals suitable for school age children, for example (Bennet, 1993), I find that I only choose judiciously from these. Some move me deeply and I can then get the story into my experience. When I retell it I can reach the children's hearts because I am able to reveal the way I feel. For the most part I prefer to choose stories from my own experience as children then see an authenticity of self revelation that helps them discover their identity as they intuitively feel a response to a shared personal story.

Telling our Stories Well

The Bible story must always speak for itself. Our students, many of whom come from homes where Bible stories are no longer told or read must, if our Christian culture and Seventh-day Adventist

tradition is to survive, continue to hear and learn to tell the stories of God's actions on our behalf. Our predecessors learned the Bible story, midrash / mishnah, creed and testimony in each new age. The foundation has always been biblical storytelling. While this essay argues that narrative theology or "talking about God by telling stories about humans" is just as valid today as it was in Jesus' day, it is important to let the Bible be heard. It was written in an oral voice and when it is orally proclaimed it regains its story power. Boomershine (1993) argues that there are educational values in the memorisation and recital of Bible stories (p.11). He argues that the church has experienced a major memory loss analogous to that experienced following a stroke which creates a profound disorientation, insecurity and the inability to act. The church should do all it can to encourage parents to continue to read and tell the Bible stories. Church schools must also make this central. As part of what he sees as a foundation process in Christian Education Boomershine wants Biblical storytelling restored as a congregational activity where each child prepares a Bible story to present in church.

In all our storytelling we need to understand that each story is in itself a small drama, a working out of a problem, dilemma or choice that needs to be made not only by the actors but by the narrator and the listeners. It is about how we ought to live. To get the most out of a story it must be thoroughly planned. Choose the words carefully. Donze (1985) says when we develop a love for words we will have no difficulty telling stories as they need to be told (p.86). In planning a story as a drama that is being worked out in the lives of its participants, it is possible with most stories to have Act One introducing the characters and setting the scene, Act Two developing the action and bringing us to a dilemma or crisis and Act Three resolving the crisis and often giving insights that allow us to see the implications. While most theorists agree that the story should tell its own values, and Jesus seems to agree as he refused to moralise, rather saying "he that hath ears let him hear", I believe some discussion of a story's outcome can sometimes provide valuable insights for both the children and the

storyteller. I think this is age and topic related as young children with particular needs may need to discuss for example what "stranger danger" or "an egocentric view of forgiveness" really means.

An important aspect of storytelling is the need to make it interactive. We need to really listen to our students stories. As in Bible times

> God lives in stories that permit a gamut of experiences from fear to affront, and dismay to joy, surprise and delight. It is clear that God lives on the lips of story-tellers (Brueggeman, 1994, p.2).

From the earliest years children should be trained and encouraged to tell their stories. When a child comes to school with a broken collar bone help them put the " How I broke my collar-bone" story firmly in place by prompts such as where had you been?, what were you doing?, how tall was the tree?, how were you feeling?, what did you say?, and what have you learned about tree climbing? Get them to tell you again. Get them to tell the class and file it as a class story so that at irregular intervals Janet can be asked to "tell us about the time you broke your collar-bone Janet." All children can learn the dramatic pattern that stories follow.

Work by White (1989) and Epston (1989) in the area of narrative therapy for children and adults who have psychological and emotional problems has dramatically shown the power of narratives in people's lives. The very act of carefully recording people's stories and replaying them back via tape or script has revitalised their way of viewing and rescripting the story of their lives. We should never forget Paul's injunction that we are all living epistles. While listening to children's stories our ears should be attuned to those who might need professional help. The important thing is that Christian teachers are able to be vulnerable and open enough themselves so that children will trust them enough to share their personal stories.

Conclusion

This essay argues that stories need to be used in more meaningful ways to integrate our faith and learning in Christian education. Making the right choice of story is very important. It is not enough to just tell them imaginatively. They have to be stories that are worth telling. To achieve this goal we need to focus on stories that enhance love, beauty, courage, honesty, humility, adventure and laughter as each one of these characteristics is important in the strengthening and exercise of our faith. In one sense we should love our stories as we love our children. We have to live the characters so as to bring children to a sense of wonder, awe and commitment in the presence of God. For me, storytelling is related to prayer, contemplation and love. As we 'waste time' with the Lord and loved ones we gain a sense of the profound beauty and wonder of living the gospel in a meaningful way (Donze, 1985, p.13). While White (1943,p.431) reminds us that teachers of Bible stories should possess the very best intellects, it is primarily in our personal living relationship with Jesus Christ, the Prince of Storytellers, that we will find our success.

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