

STORYTELLING IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

By Brad Stutzman

Introducing Storytelling

Jason and his wife are sitting in the same section of the sanctuary that they sit almost every Sunday morning. Jason and many others stayed focused on Pastor Jeff as he taught about the importance of recognizing God's awesomeness on a daily basis; a message that Jason had heard countless times, yet never fully understood what that looks like. Then pastor Jeff did something fairly unusual. Rather than just give several points about why they should recognize God's awesomeness, he began telling a story. This story was about how Jeff's kindergartener started going to school this year and how Jeff had to walk him there everyday. The first day of school, his kid was amazed at the crossing guard and was in awe of all of the power that this man had. He could control traffic and that made him awesome in the sight of the five year old. It was like meeting a celebrity; there was nervousness and reverence for the crossing guard. The child was star struck. This lasted for a couple of months into the school year. However, as time went on the crossing guard became more and more familiar to pastor Jeff's five year old and eventually the child stopped even noticing his presence. As Pastor Jeff told this story, Jason began to realize the parallel between pastor Jeff's five year old and himself and his lack of reverence for God in his life. For the next several days Jason thought about this story and how he could develop more respect and acknowledgement of God in his life. Its stories like Pastor Jeff's that help lead people like Jason toward the understanding of abstract concepts in Christian education. Churchgoers seem to feel that the most memorable, informative and moving parts of sermons are the stories told (Chapell, 2001). These can be stories told in person, or through visual media.

The Necessity of Storytelling

Christian educators in the twenty-first century have become increasingly aware of the necessity of stories for understanding among their students and for life change to take place (Miller, 2003). When it is suitably employed, storytelling is effective for a number of reasons. Storytelling can not only help transfer content from short term memory to long term memory for students, but it also helps bridge the gap between the cognitive learning theory and the humanistic learning theory. There are many advantages that come with this biblical method of teaching that are often overlooked in education. Christian educators must grasp on to

the concept of using stories in their teaching in order to more effectively lead students in the twenty-first century to truth and ultimately to life change (Gerald, 2006).

Definition of Storytelling

As defined by Dorothy Sayers (1969), a world-renowned English author, stories are acts of experience, expression and recognition. A story is a narrative account of an experience or an event (Webster's Dictionary, 2010). So then a storyteller is someone who tells stories. Author Mark Miller (2003) defines a storyteller as someone who invites other people to engage in the experience of a story. There are a number of ways that a story can be told including oral narrative, written narrative, and it can be expressed through film, music or any of the arts. Through multiple different means, stories have been told as far back as man has record, from the beginning of human history.

Knowledge From Stories

Stories and Knowledge

Stories are the gas for the brain. The use of story is "arguably one of the oldest and most elemental forms of knowing... it [story] is a way by which and through which we come to know and understand ourselves, others, the world around us, and even God" (Bradt, 1997, p. 8). Some argue that the brain itself is a narrative device that "runs on stories" (Combs & Beach, 1994, p. 464). Bruce Seymour (2007) points out that the well respected educational psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) makes a compelling case that humans are born with a "prelinguistic readiness" to order experience in the form of stories (p. 77). In short, "our brains organize our experiences and understand what they mean in the form of stories." Stories are essential in thought not only because they shape human's experience of the world, but also because they make things easier to remember (Seymour, 2007, p. 17, 27).

Stories and Memory

Stories play an essential role in educating students as they help foster the storage of content in the student's memory. Roger Schank (1995), the director of the Institute for Learning Sciences, claims, "stories are a way of preserving the connectivity of events that would otherwise be disassociated over time... therefore one reason we tell stories is to help remember them" (p. 124). Research shows that stories help the learner store, retain and recall information (Shaw, 1999). The following is how stories affect the brain and its ability to remember.

Before looking specifically at the affect of stories, it is important to gain an understanding of memory and the storage of information. Since the 1890's a distinction has been made between short-term memory and long-term memory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). Years later, psychologists coined the term "working memory" as a more in depth short-term memory system. Baddeley (1986) describes working memory as "a system for the temporary holding and manipulation of information during the performance of a range of cognitive tasks such as comprehension, learning, and reasoning" (p. 33-34). While researchers have not found and agreed upon a set time or number of chunks for the working memory's capacity (Rose, Myerson, Roediger, & Hale, 2010), it is agreed that the goal of educators is to effectively transition content from the working memory to long-term memory of the student where they can retrieve the information later when application is necessary (Cardellichio & Field, 1997).

Judy Willis (2007), a neurologist, author and teacher, suggests that a behaviorist approach (rote memorization, etc...) to education is not the most effective when trying to transition information from working memory to long-term memory. Rather a cognitive approach with an understanding of brain-based strategies would help the students "access and utilize more effective types of memory storage and retrieval." Willis goes on to explain that in order for newly learned material to be retained, it must enter into the network of the brain's wiring (p. 312). Thomas Cardellichio and Wendy Field (1997) make similar arguments and go on to list seven strategies in which information can effectively transition into long-term memory; one of which is using analogies. Looking for forced correspondences between the content being taught and the analogy or story being told requires a greater stretch. By stretching the brain like this it employs different parts of the organ, which will in turn help instill the content into long-term memory (p. 35). By instilling it into long-term memory, it can be retrieved later when the content needs to be applied. This is the affect that stories have on the brain and why it is so necessary to use stories in Christian education.

Stories as a Means to an End

While it is important to understand how stories affect the brain and it's storage abilities, this is only a means to an end. What is more important is that the storage of this information in Christian education and the ability to call on the information leads to life change. These stories can help learners "move beyond information to new ideas" and new plans for a more holy lifestyle (Shaw, 1999, p. 100). This personal edification is the life change that is the ultimate goal of Christian education (Estep, 2008, p. 68), and is most successfully achieved when a bridge is built between the multiple approaches to education.

The Bridge

Debates about the most effective approaches to educating learners have long boiled in the pan of education. Intelligent theorists from different views have offered multiple theories, all adding to the sum knowledge of education that is present today. However, it is a uniting of these multiple approaches that can lead to the most effective life change that storyteller is aiming towards. Stories can build the bridge between specifically two of the approaches; the cognitive learning theory and the humanistic learning theory.

Stories and the Cognitive Learning Theory

While the behaviorist theory emphasizes the change in the learner's behavior, the cognitive learning theory emphasizes the importance of the learner thinking about the content. This theory focuses on the learner's comprehension of the content and their use of thought (Yount, 1996, p. 191). Using stories is an effective, practical way to encourage the listener or viewer to think about the content that is being taught. Stories "contain a hidden dynamic of living truth that captures attention and furthers understanding in a way that no other sermonic tool can match" (Chapell, 2001, p. 14).

By telling a story, the educator is affording the opportunity for the learner to think deeply about the implications of the content being taught for their lives (Barton & Booth, 1990, p. 22). Cardellichio and Field (1997) confirm this by explaining that using analogies, or stories, can grow the student's neural networks and deepen their understanding of the content, which naturally creates meaning for how they can apply the concept (p. 36). Storytellers should strive to help their learners "sit back, tilt their heads and in their thoughts, look around them to see how God's truth is real and visible in the world today and to see the results of this truth" (Beshore, 2009, p. 44).

Stories and the Humanistic Learning Theory

By implementing stories into the lesson plan, teachers are not only applying the cognitive learning theory, but also the humanistic learning theory. The humanistic learning approach emphasizes the importance of attitudes and the values of the student rather than just the thinking (Yount, 1996, p. 231). Professor, author, and former Chairman of the Christian Education Department of Talbot School of Theology, Dr. Michael Anthony (1991), gives eight principles of educational humanism in his article "Humanism in American Christian Education." By using stories, teachers can build on more than just one of these humanistic principles.

The first humanistic principle that telling stories builds on is that they can help build a relationship between the storyteller and the learner

(Anthony, 1991). By telling a story, the learner is allowed to interact with the storyteller on a personal level, especially when the story being told involves the storyteller himself. It may be the first inkling learners have that this educator is a real person that they can relate to (Collins & Cooper, 1997, p. 14).

The second way that telling a story builds on the humanistic learning approach is that it helps students to “identify with others. Empathize with them and relate their feelings to the feelings of others” (Anthony, 1991, p. 85). Mark Miller (2003) presents an approach to learning that emphasizes helping students experience the content through the telling of stories. Miller states, “In a story a person can identify with situations he or she has never been in. The individual’s imagination is unlocked to dream what was previously unimaginable” (p. 33). Storytelling has “a distancing effect” that allows the student to “step back from themselves, to step out of themselves, and to become someone new” (Zipes, 1995, p. 11).

The final main principle of humanistic education that telling stories can build on is the importance of helping create a learning environment that is free from fear (Anthony, 1991). Kenn Gangel (1999) argues the importance of a similar principle for education by claiming that in order for effective Christian education to take place, the atmosphere must be a nonthreatening and safe environment (p. 59). D. Bruce Seymour (2007), Assistant Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Talbot School of Theology, feels that rather than slamming truth down the student’s throat, stories can offer a safer way of teaching Biblical truths. Seymour writes, “Stories are often a safe way to communicate, because the truth embedded in a story can be presented indirectly. Truth is often accepted most easily when it is presented indirectly” (p. 19). “Our generation is not motivated by preaching that tells them what they should do or should not do” (Gerald, 2006, p. 72). Many more people will accept the truth of the gospel if they understood how it applied to their everyday lives. Stories are an effective, safe way to communicate that truth in practical ways that apply directly to people’s lives.

Biblical Foundations of Storytelling

What is arguably the most important truth that should be taught in Christian education is in fact expressed from God to mankind in a story format. The gospel of Jesus Christ and God’s plan of salvation for men is told as stories in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And within that story, the main character, Jesus, is portrayed as a methodical storyteller himself. “For Jesus, method and message are one... His message demanded that the method he use be descriptive, concrete, and full of pictures. To announce the kingdom of God, he used parables,

metaphors and similes. Jesus was a storytelling man” (White, 1982, 21). Jesus was the best at what he did. No one will ever be able to top Jesus’ ability to tell stories. However, even “the worst storyteller will be more interesting than the best list maker or bullet-point presenter” (Seymour, 2007, 13).

Conclusion

Stories are arguably the most effective way to communicate truth to someone. By listening and/ or seeing stories, people transition content from their short-term memory to their long-term memory. On top of this benefit, telling a story is an effective way of bridging the cognitive learning theory and the humanistic learning theory. Both of which must be applied in order for truth to be successfully understood. Finally, this method of educating is something that Jesus Christ, the master teacher, employed when teaching his followers and is a method that Christian educators in the twenty first century must take a hold of and use as they try to teach truth their generation.

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