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Once upon a time ...

In the 1890s, during the years surrounding the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's journey to the New World, a particular way of telling Columbus's story came to prominence. According to this version, Columbus's fifteenth century peers, as well as the sailors on his ships, believed the earth to be flat. This led them to the superstition that if anyone sailed too far they might meet their doom by falling off the end of the world. Against this background Columbus was cast as a solitary hero, grasping with both hands his conviction that the Earth was in fact round and so advancing the cause of scientific knowledge in the face of the superstitions of his day. This story became "almost orthodox among schoolchildren"; in fact it is largely invented.¹

In reality the educated world of Columbus's day believed the earth to be spherical, but disagreed about the size of the sphere. Columbus

¹ Ihde, 1993:61.

was actually wrong on this point, and his false beliefs about the size of the earth led him to expect to reach Japan within three thousand miles of Spain. Why, then, should the story come to be told differently in the 1890s? Don Ihde points out that the context in the late nineteenth century was one of argument concerning the relationship between science and religion, and suggests that “the tale spread in the nineteenth century was part of what could be called progressivist mythology designed to show that religious people were superstitious; that science dispelled such superstition; and that such knowledge was progressive”.² The Columbus story was retold in such a way as to make it an example of scientific enlightenment emerging out of religious superstition.

Of course this is but one of many tellings of the Columbus story, a story which has been told and heard in different ways as the beliefs of the tellers and hearers have shifted. Columbus has been at different times and for different hearers the representative of Christendom discovering the New World on behalf of Christian Europe, the representative of scientific progress overcoming superstition, and, more recently, the leading figure in the conquest and rape of America.³ These various ways of telling the story are not merely different; they are in conflict. Both their plausibility in their own contexts and their conflict with other tellings of the story are grounded not merely in the bare ‘facts’, but also in the basic beliefs of their tellers and their hearers. Stories are not innocent.

The different ways in which stories can be told and heard makes story-telling a risky activity. Perhaps for that reason, some have argued that at least some kinds of story should be kept out of schooling as far as possible. The ancient philosopher Plato inaugurated a long tradition of distrusting literary stories on the grounds that they are

² Ihde, 1993:62.

³ Cf. e.g. Todorov, 1983. Hauerwas claims that “no story grips the imagination of our educative practices more determinatively than ‘Columbus discovered America’ ... Of course there can be disputes about whether Columbus was the first discoverer of the ‘new world’, or whether he really discovered what we now call ‘America’, but the main outline of that story is not questioned. It is the story that forms our education system, privileging as it does the necessary background we call Europe, the Holy Roman Empire, the Roman Empire, Greece, the role of science, the great philosophers, and so on.” (Hauerwas, 1992:218).

several steps removed from the truth, they appeal to the passions rather than reason and they are frivolous rather than useful.⁴ These ideas proved influential and enduring, and have been echoed by various Christian writers across the centuries.⁵ Let's stick to the facts, some would say. Keep story-telling for the final lesson on Friday afternoon in primary schools and, in secondary schools, keep it within the bounds of language and literature lessons and well away from the factual and logical heart of education.⁶

In the next few chapters we will explore an alternative view which suggests that story can have a more important place in education than this. In fact it can play a pervasive role in giving meaning to learning, doing so in ways which bring our basic visions of life into play. Before returning to what gets taught in school, we will begin by considering how narrative is important to the whole of life, and why we should take it seriously.

Stories, stories everywhere

Stories are all around us in our daily lives and are of many kinds, many genres. From very early in life, we meet with fairy tales, fables, folk tales, myths, legends, epics, parables, allegories and many more besides. They have different settings, plot-lines and themes. We listen to them, read them, view them in plays and films, hear them in song, make them up, change them. They make us laugh, cry, reflect, imagine, lose ourselves.

Scholars disagree on which elements are essential to narrative as a literary form. Elements commonly listed include plot, echo, repetition, foreshadowing, contrast, irony, tension, conflict, and resolution. In the broadest sense, a narrative is an account provided by a narrator of characters and events moving in some pattern over time and space. In a narrower sense, the element of plot is added and the movement

⁴ Plato & Waterfield, 1994: section X.

⁵ See Ryken, 1979:13-18.

⁶ See chapter 9 on the importance of metaphor. Both narrative and metaphor have been regarded by some as decorative luxuries of which our language should be purged when we come to the factual heart of education.

over space and time is from conflict to resolution.⁷

Some of the stories that surround us can be short, even very short, but nevertheless quite significant. In his book *The End of Education*, Neil Postman refers to the basic stories which shape education as our ‘gods’ with a small ‘g’. Writing of “some gods that fail”, he argues that the majority of important television commercials “take the form of religious parables organized around a coherent theology”. The stories which they contain offer a kind of religious education, introducing us to the lifestyle demanded by the gods of the age. He writes:

Like all religious parables, these commercials put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of Heaven. This will be obvious to those who have taken to heart the Parable of the Person with the Rotten Breath, the Parable of the Stupid Investor, the Parable of the Lost Traveler’s Checks, the Parable of the Man Who Runs through Airports, or most of the hundreds of others that are part of our youth’s religious education.⁸

We could add countless examples to Postman’s list: the parable of the contented family with the gravy cubes, the parable of the man and woman who lived next door to each other and found happiness in instant coffee and, of course, the gospel good news that comes from the man who represents a fruit-canning company – “he say ‘ye-e-es!’”!

These stories surround most children from their earliest days, offering miniature narrative models of what it is to be successful or unsuccessful, desirable or undesirable, clever or stupid. Postman argues that they have a shaping role in our lives, teaching us to bow down to the god of consumership.

We are shaped and envisioned by story

The stories that surround us help to make us what we become. They shape our attitudes to life, form our ideals and supply our visions. They provide us with identity and ways of living. They furnish us

⁷ Cf. Fackre, 1984:5.

⁸ Postman, 1996:34.

with heroes and antiheroes. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes,

It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons [sic] who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.⁹

MacIntyre describes those deprived of stories as “unscripted”, lacking a sense of how life should go; it is perhaps more common for individuals to end up ‘mis-scripted’, presented mainly with unhealthy narrative models for life. One such was the actor Denzel Washington when he was a boy. He has said, in the course of an interview about his childhood as an African American brought up on the edge of the Bronx,

How many heroes are there out there for us? When I was a kid there was nobody up there... Who do you look up to? Doctors and astronauts? Or the pimps and dealers? ... The pimps had everything all of us wanted.¹⁰

Washington’s mother scrimped and saved to put her son through a private education. He started to read and to realise “that there was a world out there with real heroes in it”. He has gone on to make a career out of playing heroes, including Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom*, Malcolm X in the film of the same name, and, in *The Hurricane*, Ruben Carter, hero of a Bob Dylan song, who spent 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. The stutterer who lacked a healthy script found his heroes and he has learned to tell their stories as he interprets the scripts of such films as these.

⁹ MacIntyre, 1984:216.

¹⁰ Wynne Jones, 2000.

Stories are central to human understanding

Many recent writers have advanced the claim that, far from being merely pleasant diversions, stories are central to the way in which we structure our understanding of ourselves and others, of actions and events. They are part of the warp and woof of our language and thought, of our whole experience of the world and our way of living. We don't just enjoy them as escapes from normal activity, we think in stories, constantly telling and re-telling to ourselves the stories of our lives, our days, our careers, our communities. And we dream in stories, however chaotic these tales of the imagination may be at times. Whether waking or sleeping, characters and events are seen by us in patterns in space and time. We locate ourselves and one another and the things that happen to us and around us in narrative contexts.

Alasdair MacIntyre provides an example to show how narrative is basic to understanding human actions:

I am standing waiting for a bus and the young man standing next to me suddenly says: 'The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.' There is no problem as to the meaning of the sentence he uttered: the problem is, how to answer the question, what was he doing in uttering it? We would render his action of utterance intelligible if one of the following turned out to be true. He has mistaken me for someone who yesterday had approached him in the library and asked: 'Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common wild duck?' Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who has urged him to break down his shyness by talking to strangers. 'But what shall I say?' 'Oh, anything at all.' Or he is a Soviet spy waiting at a pre-arranged rendezvous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact. In each case the act of utterance become(s) intelligible by finding its place in a narrative.¹¹

The words spoken by the young man in MacIntyre's example are easy enough to understand: they have *meaning* but, without a narrative

¹¹ MacIntyre, 1984:210.

context, they lack *meaningfulness* or point. We know what the young man is saying to us but we do not see the point of such an utterance until we can locate it within a narrative context.

N. T. Wright provides us with another striking example. He shows us that even factual statements about the natural world about us become meaningful when understood as part of a story:

‘It’s going to rain.’ This is a fairly clear statement, but its meaning varies with the context. The context supplies an implicit narrative, and the force of the statement depends on the role that it plays within those different potential narratives. If we are about to have a picnic, the statement forms part of an implicit story which is about to become a minor tragedy instead of (as we had hoped) a minor comedy. If we are in East Africa, fearing another drought and consequent crop failure, the statement forms part of an implicit story in which imminent tragedy will give way to jubilation. If I told you three days ago that it would rain today, and you disbelieved me, the statement forms part of an implicit story in which my ability as a meteorologist is about to be vindicated, and your scepticism proves groundless. If we are Elijah and his servant on Mount Carmel, the sentence invokes a whole theological story: YHWH is the true god, and Elijah is his prophet. In each case, the single statement demands to be ‘heard’ within the context of a full implicit plot, a complete implicit narrative. The meaning of a word is the job it performs in a sentence; the meaning of a sentence is the job it performs within a *story*.¹²

The narrative, implicit or explicit, provides a framework for our understanding of individual statements, it allows us to give them a particular interpretation.¹³ The absence of narrative leaves us not

¹² Wright, 1996:198.

¹³ The importance of both narrative frameworks in general and of particular narrative frameworks can be seen in the field of biblical interpretation where, for example, canonical and gnostic gospels may overlap in making similar sounding statements that are seen very differently when

closer to the truth, but rather left with statements still awaiting the context within which they can be meaningfully interpreted. The same kind of phenomenon is present when we are presented with a set of pictures or a set of descriptive phrases: we immediately set about connecting them to form a story, a narrative that relates the pictures or phrases in some patterned way.¹⁴

Biography, history and big stories

Stories don't have to be fictional. Although we sometimes say 'That's just a story!' to indicate that we regard what we are being told as untrue or largely fanciful, we also talk quite meaningfully of 'true stories'. One of the most important true stories to any of us is the story of our own life. Ask someone who they are, and before long they will be telling stories. We locate ourselves in the stories of our lives. Other people are actors in our stories and, as we soon begin to realise, they have their own stories in which we are also actors.

Not only are there stories all about us, our stories and those of other people meeting, interacting, overlapping, and developing day by day, but we find that our individual story-ettes are parts of bigger and bigger stories, interwoven with the stories of our communities and traditions, of peoples and races. Stories point backwards and forwards and ever outwards beyond their present bounds.

In the sense of 'story' that we are using, the contents of a history book are story as, indeed, are those of items in news broadcasts. They are accounts resulting from the selective activity of a 'story-teller' which present events and characters moving in patterns in space and time. Stories are not only fictional; they can be efforts to tell it like it is. But as our earlier example of the life of Columbus shows, 'true' stories of biography or history can be told in different ways and heard in different ways.

placed within the framework of the story of God's actions in human history as compared with the gnostic emphasis on the hidden wisdom of particular sayings for which narrative context is merely incidental. Cf. Thiselton, 1992:152-3,165-6.

¹⁴ At the heart of the Thematic Apperception Test used in psychology is our propensity when presented with a picture to begin to construct a story around it.

This is particularly important when we find people purporting to tell us *'the story'* of something. For example, if the story of human history is told as 'The Ascent of Man', a particular perspective is being adopted. The title says it all: the story is one of progress ever upwards through the efforts of human beings without recourse to the help of transcendent powers and, into the bargain, it is also likely to be the story of the male of the species.

Or somebody may purport to tell us 'The Story of Space Flight'. One way of doing this is to place it in the context of the story of ongoing human progress just mentioned. We might present students with pictures showing a more and more complex sequence of jet engines, culminating in today's space rockets. We might even supplement this with gripping narratives of young boys aspiring to escape the confines of their upbringing and reach for the stars, building their own homemade rockets and eventually getting to work for NASA.¹⁵ Such a narrative affirms the impressive march of technological progress through human ingenuity. On the other hand, we might tell the story of how early rocket engines were developed by a team of scientists led by Wernher von Braun. The engines were designed to power the V-2 rocket, a long-range weapon used by Germany in World War 2, and in the latter stages of the war the labour used in their development was slave labour drawn from the concentration camps and working in horrific conditions.¹⁶ At the end of the war von Braun, by then a major in the SS, and his scientific work were eagerly seized by America; he and other rocket scientists escaped the public scrutiny to which political and military leaders of the Nazi regime were subjected, and continued scientific careers with NASA. Here is a tale which does not consist only of noble aspirations and gleaming success; human invention, callous opportunism, and some of the most notorious instances of human

¹⁵ A recent bestselling example of such a story, in which Wernher von Braun figures as the author's childhood hero and the darker sides of his life story are alluded to only in passing, is *The Rocket Boys* (Hickam, 1998). The book has been made into a film (*October Sky*), student worksheets and quizzes related to the book are available on the internet, and a teachers' guide to assist with using the book in the school classroom is in preparation (information retrieved from the internet, <http://www.homerhickam.com/teachers.htm>, 18 June 2001).

¹⁶ See Neufeld, 1995.

evil went hand in hand. At stake in the different possible tellings of such a story is the question of whether technology is our hope for earthly progress or whether it too is subject to the drama of creation, fall and redemption.¹⁷

In Mathematics, the story of how probability and statistics were developed could similarly be told against different historical backgrounds. Given the historical connections between interest in probability and gambling, we could set the scene in terms of the mathematics of gambling. Perhaps a game of cards has had to be abruptly terminated; how would we work out how to divide up the money staked? On the other hand, we might choose to tell the story of John Graunt and the rise of an interest in calculating life expectancy for purposes such as life insurance. In that case we would focus on the early ‘Bills of Mortality’ which Graunt used to calculate the life expectancy of people at different ages in seventeenth century London.¹⁸ Each of these different stories could plausibly make its way into a mathematics classroom, offered as the story of probability. One suggests a focus on the human condition and the ultimate facts of life and death; the other foregrounds the gods of chance.

The stories which frame the knowledge purveyed through schooling are not innocent; they are grounded in wider beliefs and priorities, and they offer to learners a certain way of seeing the world and their own future role within it. When we purport to tell *the* story of something, our Big Stories, those which encapsulate our background sense of life’s meaning, are likely to be showing. These are the macro-stories, the meta-narratives, that underlie and pervade the smaller stories that we tell.

Examples of such meta-narratives are many. Postman lists a number in his book, from which we drew earlier in the chapter. They include “the great narrative known as ‘inductive science’”, the technology-god that it has “spawned”, the great story of democracy,

¹⁷ Cf. Marx, 1995. On the different ways in which the story of technology can be told, and the tendency of technological celebration to be accompanied by a downplaying of the darker aspects of history, see also Segal, 1995; Staudenmaier, 1985.

¹⁸ In fact, these alternative starting points are related to rival definitions of probability itself, one a matter of the theoretical end-point of relative frequency as the total number of events increases and the other resting on the *a priori* notion of equally likely events.

and the narrative of “the great melting-pot” of the United States. Then there is the “god of Consumership”, and the “god of Economic Utility” with which it is coupled.¹⁹ We need such overarching narratives, Postman argues, for without them, life has no meaning, learning no purpose and, as Postman puts it, “schools are houses of detention, not attention”.²⁰ But a great deal hangs on *which* narratives we choose to inhabit our curricula. Christian educators will find themselves asking how the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption relates to the narratives identified by Postman, and what its curricular implications might be. In our next chapter we will look more closely at the relationship between the curriculum and the competing stories that bid to shape it.

¹⁹ Postman, 1996:5, 7-9, 10-11, 13-14, 27-33, 50-58.

²⁰ Postman, 1996:7.