

8

Promises and perils in story

Stories, stories everywhere. Stories surrounding us in our early childhood, shaping our sense of good and bad, of possibility and futility. Stories beamed to our television screens, peddling their own visions of life. Stories appearing in lessons across the school curriculum, and deeper stories underpinning the design of the curriculum itself. It seems that, as we seek to understand how visions of life shape learning, we cannot avoid reckoning with the power and influence of stories. Should this excite us or worry us? Is it a cause for fear or celebration? Probably both.

Problems with unicorns

We discussed in the last chapter the issue facing Postman and Egan concerning how we decide which stories to teach and which stories

are true. The profusion of competing stories offering different visions of life can seem to invite relativism, with no story any more widely reliable than any other. This would, however, be a somewhat premature conclusion; the Christian claim is that the Bible offers us not just additional stories, but true stories, in fact stories which help us judge the truth of other stories.¹ In any case the pursuit of more propositional statements of truth has hardly eliminated diversity and disagreement, so the problem is not unique to narrative. For Christians, the presence of competing spirits of the age invites discernment and a passionate and compassionate retelling of the biblical story.

There are, however, other worries which are relevant to our exploration of whether narrative can legitimately bridge between the Bible and education. Plato worried that narratives would inevitably lead us away from the truth. Christians are hardly in a position to agree, given Jesus' overwhelming preference for stories as the medium of his teaching. However, even if the story form is not in and of itself necessarily an enemy of truth, we should take seriously the fact that our familiarity with particular stories can not only enable learning, but also block it.

“When Marco Polo traveled to China,” writes Umberto Eco, “he was obviously looking for unicorns.”² Why? Because at that time and in his culture there were many tales current which took it for granted that unicorns existed and were to be found in far-off, exotic countries. When he visited Java and saw an animal with a single horn on its muzzle, he naturally identified it as a unicorn. He had to report, however, that unicorns did not in fact look as they were described in the stories: they were black, rather than white, had a head resembling a boar and feet like those of an elephant. He was in fact describing a rhinoceros, but he had been so conditioned by the stories he knew that instead of acknowledging it as a new, unknown kind of animal, he laboured to make it fit with his existing knowledge of unicorns. Eco comments that Marco Polo “could only refer to what he already knew and expected to meet. He was victim of his background books.”³

Our stories can lead us astray, drawing us to work at forcing the world into the contours of our favourite tales instead of fitting our tales to the truth. Christians are hardly immune to this tendency. It

¹ Cf. Wolterstorff, 1995:103.

² Eco, 1999:71.

³ Eco, 1999:72.

was long believed, for example, that the story of the sun standing still during Joshua's battle against the Amorites (Joshua 10) taught us that the sun must orbit the earth. We are now aware that this is not the case, and so we read that story differently; but can we be sure that none of our other familiar stories are working together with our ignorance to lead us astray?

The seductions of narrative

Of course it might be replied here that we simply need to be more careful about distinguishing true stories from false ones. Things may not, however, be quite so simple. Postman suggests that all the narratives he lists in his book are 'imperfect' and 'even dangerous'.⁴ His concern reflects an awareness, typical also of many postmodern thinkers, that we are not simply innocent victims of imperfect stories. We often *like* to have reality falsified in ways that please us, and are capable of twisting even true stories to our own benefit – as Paul puts it, we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness”.

This suggests that the problem is not just that we don't know enough. When a false picture offered by an appealing tale legitimises our domination of others and makes us feel good about ourselves into the bargain, we are only too gladly led astray. As Amos Wilder puts it:

many popular as well as more pretentious novels are fraudulent ... because writer and reader conspire to dream a world in accordance with their own wishes or resentments ... There are various kinds of traps which the true storyteller must overcome. Language has its inertia; narrative has seductions; the heart has its idols.⁵

Stories – even the biblical story – can be used in a self-serving manner. The Christian story can be told in such a way as to confirm our own prejudices and mask our sins – our love of wealth, our taste for being right, our low opinion of some other individual or group. The intertwining of the Christian story with the story of Western progress

⁴ Postman, 1996:11.

⁵ Wilder, 1983:364.

has led to missions based on the prior assumption that the receiving culture is entirely inferior. Bruce Olson reports of his first meeting with the natives of the upper reaches of the Orinoco River that they felt that the converts to Christianity among their tribe did not care about them any more. When he asked why, he was told:

Why, they've rejected everything about us ... They won't sing our songs now. They sing those weird, wailing songs that are all out of tune and don't make sense. And the construction which they call a church! Have you seen their church? It's square! How can God be in a square church? Round is perfect...It has no ending, like God. But the Christians, their God has points all over, bristling at us. And how those Christians dress! Such foolish clothes ...⁶

The Christian converts had been taught how to dress in clothes with buttons, how to wear shoes, how to sing Western songs, on the assumption that all of this somehow went with coming to faith.

But cultural insensitivity is not the only result of big stories being wielded in an oppressive manner. This is pithily illustrated by a South African saying: "When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'Let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible."⁷ The bringing of the biblical big story to the African seems to be linked with oppression. A particular reading of the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11 played a role in the ideological justification of apartheid policies in South Africa.⁸ And think back to the various versions of the Columbus story described at the start of chapter 6 – Christian teachers would hardly be well advised to revert to the telling of this story as simply a tale of the brave Christian adventurer extending the kingdom of Christ. Believing in the seriousness of sin, Christians of all people should be aware of the very real potential for our storytelling (including our retelling of biblical stories) to be bent to

⁶ Olson, 1973:50-51.

⁷ This saying is recorded in Goldingay, 1994:91, but the writer refers it back to Mofeking, 1988.

⁸ See Cloete & Smit, 1994.

our own ends in the name of God's big story. In the same manner we need to be aware of the potential for our curricular stories to paint the world as we would like to think it is and evade the hard questions which reality might put to us.

Should this deter us from bringing biblical narrative into contact with our designs for teaching and learning? Surely not; if the problem is with our own impulses towards self-serving thinking, then it may infect any of the narratives which structure our curriculum, and excluding the Bible will hardly remove the issue. In fact, the Bible may help us at precisely this point.

Biblical criticism of religious stories

Unlike those competing narratives which encourage us to believe in human potential and rest secure in human knowledge, the Bible tells a story of sinful beings who have chosen pride over love and have an ingrained habit of suppressing the truth, to the point where we will murder our Saviour. It invites us to consider how sin may affect our thinking as well as our doing.⁹ What's more, it contains within itself examples of stories, even biblical stories about God, being distorted to serve our own interests. In Jeremiah chapter 7, for instance, we find the prophet Jeremiah standing against the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The leaders are busy retelling a story drawn (if selectively) from many Old Testament texts (see e.g. Psalm 132). Their narrative focuses on God's residence in the temple. God chose Zion as his dwelling place, this story goes, and promised to live in the temple here forever, in the midst of the people he has chosen. We, the chosen people, are therefore safe from disaster as long as we continue to worship at the temple and bring the daily sacrifices that God required. Jeremiah's story is radically different: yes, God chose us and promised to dwell with us, but only if we obey all of his commands. Given the treatment meted out to the weak and vulnerable in the community, the

⁹ See, for example, Plantinga, 1982; Wolterstorff, 1981. See also chapter 4 of Shortt, 1991. This should lead to a proper humility and openness to others as, for example, Paulo Freire advocates in his talk of dialogical relations between teacher-students and student-teachers in chapter 2 of Freire, 1996b.

dishonesty, greed and unfaithfulness, God is prepared to utterly disown the sacrifices offered at the temple.¹⁰ In fact unless there is a radical change he will destroy the temple itself and hand his people over to the heathen. The benefit of hindsight should not blind us to the fact that the story told by the leaders was the religious orthodoxy of the day, while that offered by Jeremiah was sacrilegious, unthinkable.¹¹

We see the same telling of shocking stories in the ministry of Jesus. Here again our familiarity and hindsight can obscure the sheer outrageousness of stories such as the one in which a corrupt tax collector who barely knows how to pray goes home from the temple justified before God, while one of the religious leaders, a Pharisee, remains unaccepted even after all the appropriate prayers and observances. While the stories of the Bible, and even its bigger overarching story, can become captive to our own complacency, they can also speak tellingly to that complacency. Story can confront us with what we are like, acting as a mirror to show us our warts and all the hidden depths of our being. Shakespeare's Hamlet said, 'The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'.¹² Centuries earlier, as recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 12 verses 1 to 14, Nathan the prophet told King David a story about a rich man who took from the poor man everything he had, one little ewe lamb that was like a daughter to him: Nathan's story engaged the king's attention and also caught his conscience.

It is also worth noting that the Bible models for us not only a critical questioning of fossilised versions of its own story, but also multiple retellings of the same story. From the parallel narratives of the post-Exodus wanderings or the Israelite monarchy to the provision of not one, but four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, each with its own particular theological emphases, the internal diversity of Scripture may also be suggestive for our educational use of story.

The Bible gives us ample warning of our sinful tendency to distort the truth, and surely invites us to have these warnings clearly in mind if we try to allow the biblical story to frame and inform our educational projects. Any such effort must be accompanied by a considerable

¹⁰ See Jeremiah 7:22. (The word 'just' in the NIV is an interpretive addition to the text.)

¹¹ For a further example see Jeremiah 44.

¹² Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2.

amount of self-examination if it is not to lead to a curriculum which ‘dream[s] a world in accordance with [our] own wishes or resentments’. We need to allow the Bible to continue to stand over against our interpretations of it. As Brian Walsh puts it,

Biblical reflection is foundational to all of Christian life, education included. But this requires an ongoing serious, passionate and loving engagement with Scripture. And this must be an engagement that allows our reading of Scripture to be full of questions and to be patient enough not to demand answers too quickly ... What I am talking about is an indwelling of the biblical narrative in such a way that this story, with all of its tensions, plot confusions and dead-ends, and in all of its historical oddities, is, nonetheless our story. We find our identity as the people of God in this narrative, it shapes our character and it forms our vision.¹³

And in this process of indwelling, we interpret the book and, Walsh goes on to say, ‘interpretation is something people do in community, in relation to tradition and in a particular time and place’¹⁴ rather than with a once-and-for-all-time finality.

Having soberly considered the challenges facing their own storytelling, Christians should, however, insist that this warning also be heard by secular educators. The biblical story does not only suggest the need for some ongoing discomfort among believers. It also poses a pointed challenge to non-believers whose curricula dream a world immune to the presence of God and imagine a daily practice of life that has no need to take that presence into account. The Bible insists that this is a major instance of a self-serving, oppressively distorted narrative. In the Christian school context, where a version of the Christian story has pride of place, it is Christian teachers whose consciences need to remain soft. In secular contexts, where other worldviews provide the dominant frame and work to exclude their rivals, there is a need to hear the biblical story’s eloquent depictions of the dangers of unbelief.

¹³ Walsh, 2000:112.

¹⁴ Walsh, 2000:112.

Some other perils and promises

Implicit in much of the above is a great strength of narrative, one which corresponds directly to its dangers. One reason why stories can be so seductive is because they appeal to us so effectively. Story appeals to us holistically: it engages us as whole people rather than making simple appeal to our cognitive faculties. It offers us models to follow, characters who embody possibilities, positive or negative, who inspire us to better things or warn us against worse. It offers us a world in which to explore courses of action best not tried out in practice. It communicates through what it does not say as well as what it does say, through assumptions and suggestions, sometimes by leaving something vital unsaid.¹⁵ It can be far more accessible to a wider variety of learners than an analysis and comparison of abstracted principles and truths.¹⁶ In short, the seductions of narrative come from its power to sway and inspire us, and are therefore potentially a force for good as well as for evil.¹⁷

¹⁵ Compare Moberly's comments on 2 Kings 2: "The sense of divine purpose and guidance is almost overwhelming, yet God himself remains constantly as it were offstage (the only partial exception being in verse 11). God is strongly present, and yet remains hidden. It is through a masterful use of the possibilities of narrative presentation that the writer has conveyed these effects." (Moberly, 1986:78).

¹⁶ This is argued as a major benefit by Egan (1988). Jerome Bruner says that narrative "triggers presuppositions" and thereby means more than it says, whereas the more traditional way of knowing "eschews or blocks the triggering of presuppositions and renders them as transparent as possible ... substitutes entailments in place of presuppositions" (Bruner, 1985:108-109).

¹⁷ Fernhout, following Wolterstorff, argues that a defect of some ways of using the notions of a 'Christian worldview' and a 'Christian mind' to frame Christian education is that these constructs place the emphasis too much on the cognitive, on the intellectual, on understanding the right things. As a result they tend to inadequately address community, the emotions, the role of celebration and lament, the actual brokenness of the world as it emerges in our experience (as opposed to our doctrines), and the diversity of gifts present in the classroom. Fernhout argues that a recasting of our idea of a 'Christian worldview' in the light of narrative goes some way towards addressing these concerns (Fernhout, 1997).

Story can also shift the emphasis from rules and precepts to virtues, as it focuses on the kind of persons we are called to become (or not to become). Rather than the rational weighing of abstract principles at the centre of the moral life, story allows us to engage with real people in their stories and particularly with the human being Who alone lived a perfect life. His story calls us to *follow*, to be and to become rather than just to do and decide.

A focus on story is also less individualistic and more community-centred and tradition-centred than our more didactic approaches to teaching and learning often tend to be. D. John Lee, writing of his experience of growing up as a Chinese Canadian, says, “The flip side of the question ‘Who am I?’ is another question: ‘Who are my people?’ Or, narratively speaking, my character cannot be understood apart from other characters in my story.”¹⁸ A narrational approach to curriculum can therefore help the student see that he is not an island, alone on a wide wide sea, but part of a mainland with a history, of a people with all their overlapping stories. We need not be, as the folksong puts it, orphans in a day of no tomorrows, but rather children of promise.

This note of promise points us towards another important benefit which a focus on the biblical story can bring to our educational deliberations. Harry Fernhout talks of the ‘beckoning’ aspect of the big story and he continues:

The element of *vision* or critical imagination is deeply rooted in memory...But...the focus is not on what has been but what ought to be...A world view story, by providing its adherents with the resources to envision something different and better, inspires people to live towards that vision. This dynamic is clearly visible, for example, in the writings of the Old Testament prophets.

Because it is oriented to what ought to be, vision has the quality of being critical of both the present and the past. In a story-formed world view, then, the present moment of a community or culture stands in a creative tension between the resources of memory and the critique of vision.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lee, 1993:14-15.

¹⁹ Fernhout, 1997:86-87.

In other words, a story is more than a collection of timeless pieces of information because it moves from past to future, from memory to vision.²⁰ It can therefore offer us not just individual items to consider, but a sense of direction, an orientation within time and history, an image of where we have come from and where we might be headed. It places before us the question of what is worth remembering and for what we should hope.

Some recent writers have drawn attention to the variety of ‘speech-acts’ that the Bible gives expression to, by no means all of which are acts of making descriptive statements.²¹ Anthony Thiselton suggests that the ‘paradigmatic speech-act’ of the Bible is that of promise.²² The story has an ending in a new heavens and a new earth and this is not simply *foretold* by God but *promised* by him.²³ The biblical big story of history moving towards such a promised end is, however, to be distinguished sharply from what is often termed ‘the myth of progress’. As Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart put it:

²⁰ See also Groome, 1980, 1991.

²¹ See, for example, Wolterstorff, 1995, especially pages 19-94. See also Anthony Thiselton, who writes: “The biblical writings cannot be reduced to a Cartesian textbook of information that permits the response of only wooden replication of ideas or idiosyncratic novelty outside the clear boundaries of the text. Moreover, the biblical writings perform acts of declaration, proclamation, promise, verdict, pardon, liberation, commission, appointment, praise, confession, acclamation, and celebration that burst beyond the uniform model of flat ‘information’.” (Thiselton, 1999:153). He also points out that a whole range of speech-acts may be expressed in a single short passage, e.g. Hebrews 1:1-4, the words of which, as he puts it, “... perform several multilayered, multidirectional actions: ... sermon, creed, confession, hymn, praise, acclamation, exposition, argument, celebration” (Thiselton, 1999:146).

²² Thiselton, 1999:223-239.

²³ This is not always signalled by the use of the word ‘promise’: the use of another verb in the future tense “in an appropriate context of utterance (of situation, speaker, and addressee) may in fact constitute a promissory act” (Thiselton, 1999:223).

Unlike the myth of progress, Christian eschatology does not privilege future history over past history. The end of history will happen to all of history. In the resurrection all the dead of all history will rise to judgement and life in the new creation ... The countless victims of history, those whose lives were torture and scarcely lived at all, are not to be forgotten but remembered in hope of the resurrection. From this metanarrative the past is not another country from which we have travelled so far that it is of no more relevance to us. Knowing that all generations have a future in God's new creation, we practise solidarity with their sufferings, their achievements and their hopes, telling their stories as still relevant parts of the grand narrative of God's love for the world, past in which we may still find future.²⁴

The distinctive biblical emphasis on hope, as opposed to humanistic optimism or pessimism, has significance for the curriculum, for the whole and not only for particular subject areas like science and history. On these terms history is seen not as the story of man ever seeking on his own to ascend to higher levels of achievement, according to which we now 'know better' than did those in other ages, but as a story of God's reaching out to rebellious humankind. Scientific progress is not itself the source of hope. The world of nature has a future so that care for the environment is not a vain effort to hold back the tide of destruction. Human beings, from whatever period of history, share in the same human condition and have the same significance in the eyes of God. Pain and suffering are real but passing so we neither turn from them indifferently nor provide care hopelessly.

Being aware of the dangers and making much of the benefits, the Christian educator can find in narrative a very important strand to the rope that links her faith with her activity as a teacher. At the one end it does justice to the Bible as a text made up in significant measure of narrative. At the other end it connects richly with our experience of selfhood, of understanding, and of needing a sense of orientation to the past and the future. The different overall patterns offered by different stories mean that the biblical story has something distinctive to

²⁴ Bauckham, 1999:39-40. See also Wells, 1998:149.

contribute to the organisation of learning. The examples in this and the previous two chapters show this clearly, whether they concern ways of telling the story of Columbus, the history of humanity, the story of space flight, the early development of probability theory in mathematics, the portrayal of the village/town/city community, or the shape of the stories told in a series of biology booklets.

At the same time story complements, rather than replaces, the approaches discussed in earlier chapters. As Metz writes, “There is a time for storytelling and there is a time for argument”.²⁵ And *telling* the story is not a matter of words only, but also of how well the words comport with the life of the teller; the curriculum story is not fully ‘biblical’ if it is not incarnated in the life of the teller. Story adds another strand to our rope; there are yet more to come.

²⁵ Johann Batist Metz, quoted in Fackre, 1983:340. Jerome Bruner writes of two main modes of thought: what he terms the ‘paradigmatic’ mode and the narrative mode – see Bruner, 1985; also Bruner, 1996. Others have talked of ‘recognition’ and ‘cognition’; see Fackre, 1983:342.