

Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation

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At a family gathering a few years ago, I introduced myself to the new wife of a second cousin once removed, a pleasant young woman who had been sitting alone, looking intimidated by this mob of new relations, all of whom look too much alike and talk too fast. I learned that she is a physical therapist at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, where she teaches people how to walk again after accidents. But her subspecialty is teaching people how to walk down stairs. By the time she was done explaining her work to me, I was afraid to walk back to the buffet table for coffee. I had never realized that walking is so complicated.

Rather than risk walking, I showed her my remarkably double-jointed ankles--an inherited condition known to make orthopedic surgeons flinch. (Watch Irish step-dancers closely, and you will understand.) My second cousin once-removed in-law looked even more dubious about the wisdom marrying into this clan. But she got up to get coffee for both of us--and maybe to find her husband--so I had a moment to myself in which I could marvel that even someone with ligaments and tendons like flaccid elastic nonetheless walks down stairs every single day, without a scrap of thought or conscious effort.

Telling stories is a lot like walking. If you look closely, storytelling is astounding. But like walking, we do it quite well all on our own, instinctively, without knowing all the details that specialists have come to admire. Like walking, storytelling is a gift whose marvels we are likely either to take for granted or to overburden with complicated explanations whose weight incapacitates practice. I hope here to walk that fine line--loose ankles and all--toward an imaginative vision of the reciprocity of storytellers and theologians in the life of the church and, specifically, in the process called "spiritual formation."

Storytelling and Abstract Thinking

Storytelling can be invisible because it is everywhere that people gather, if we are listening to each other attentively. But storytelling can be invisible for another reason as well. In the modern world--by which I mean, for English-speakers, since about 1600--storytelling has often played second fiddle to thinking modeled upon what looks like the objective rationality of science. Telling tales doesn't seem to count for much in comparison with counting and calculus and astrophysics, much less the prowess and the promise of industrial revolution spun out into internets and the information age. And so theology, the queen of sciences, the science of God, found herself in all the predictable predicaments and thence decided--no small mistake--that whatever truths stories might tell could be told even better, even more clearly and cleanly and objectively, by systematic theologians, a separate and professional community in conversation primarily with itself. Even the stories in Scripture were seen as primitive, not primal: poets and storytellers would have been systematic theologians, if only we knew how. Shakespeare himself, by this thinking, would have been--who?--Holinshed redivivus? And all of this is not a new story, not any more.

But there has been of late a resurgent interest in storytelling. Narrative is hot stuff as the dark night of nihilism has closed in upon us: we may not know for sure, in fact we may not know at all, postmodernism claims; but oh the stories we can tell. If on the one hand all conceptual structures are built only of blood and oppression and privilege defending its privities, then on the other stories are neither true nor false but only chronologically-sequenced narrative "display," mere sentiment proclaiming its own dreamy opinions. Theology is fiction, God is a figment of our own devising, and we are to eat drink and be merry, tell tales and be glad, for when that final curtain closes there will nothing be, nothing at all, not even a dark and empty stage upon which to strut.

So be it, if you will. There can be no argument upon such grounds. There's not even room to swing a cat. And so I propose instead to step outside as if to start over, to explain what I see as a believer and a literary critic properly trained

and yet dwelling these days outside the camps either of church or academe. None of these are "my" fights, "my" territories professionally defined. Not at all: I am a poet, a storyteller, neither scholar nor priest but all too inclined to conversation with distant relations.¹ I seem to have the fey gift some storytellers have, which is to elicit stories from everyone else, to sit in the coffee shop on Central Street, around the corner from your choice of churches, and to hear quite ordinary people listening for God. I listen to the power and the passion and the nuance of their stories, I listen to these kind and decent ordinary folks who find themselves starving in a time of spiritual famine, and I am baffled that the churches nonetheless seem to be floundering.

"What is a good story" is not much different from "what good is a story." You have heard a good story when you know it might have happened to you, just like that. You have heard a good story when you see the world differently when the telling is done. You have heard a good story when your heart leaps up at what you have always known but couldn't find the words to say. In a good story, truth comes alive and grabs you by the throat before you have time to think thoughts like "the Incarnation is manifest trans-temporally in a realized eschatology among the narrative resources of a discourse community." In a good story, the Incarnation is a real God meddling in our all-too-real ordinary predicaments--and not merely an abstract element in the systematic speculations of scholars.

We belong to the stories that hold us, which are the stories that we hear from or with the people who matter to us the most. We belong to the stories told at our own kitchen tables or enroute to the orthodontist with our kids or over coffee on Central Street. We belong to stories told at wakes and at weddings and at picnics. Above all, I propose, as believers we belong to the stories told at church, whether in worship or afterwards or even on the phone later in the day, trying to schedule a meeting. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the hearing and the telling of stories is a crucial moral resource in our ordinary lives, a plain and powerful way in which we understand, preserve, and share whatever we possess

of wisdom and of virtue and of meaning in a world that seems increasingly incoherent and despairing.² In short, the life of faith is lived in storytelling and not in doctrine. And yet we need both. That's my point.

Storytelling and Relationships

Various theorists have sharply contrasted storytelling with verbal exchanges based more clearly upon fact, logic, rules, and so forth--all the verbal trappings of "scientific" sorts of thinking. Deborah Tannen argues that women sustain social bonds by swapping stories.³ Carol Gilligan argues that women do ethical and moral analyses by telling stories about relationships.⁴ Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues argue that women assimilate new information and develop skills in critical thinking through the hearing and the telling of stories.⁵ Although these scholars have focused primarily upon the storytelling skills and habits of women, storytelling as such is clearly not a gender-specific trait. Literary tradition testifies differently and, furthermore, none of these theorists comes to the question of storytelling from within a disciplined literary understanding of the many forms that a story can take. Like "chick flicks," the stories of my teenage daughter and her friends emphasize character over plot, motive and dialogue over conflict and action. Her twin brother and my older son--and their friends--tell stories no less often, no less pointedly, and with no less energy; but the emphases are all on plot and setting, just as in adventure movies. My sons and my daughter see each other's stories as not truly stories at all, and furthermore as pointless or silly. I have tried to explain, but their opinions are settled. And I suppose that's appropriate: the art of storytelling has its developmental stages and, as in so many other things, adolescence is keenly gender-specific.

Despite engendered differences in a story's style or convention or form, storytelling *per se* is a fundamental human enterprise because storytelling sustains all of our relationships, both individually and communally. In keeping up with our friends, we are keeping up with their stories and telling our own; the value of a old friend is inseparable from the common fund of stories so incessantly mined in making sense of the moment. To get to know someone new

is above all to engage in that tentative or excited exchange of stories. In fact, often we make new friends on the basis of some story that a third party thinks we need to tell or to hear told. And to settle into a new community is to learn the stories that are communal memory: Chicago's blizzard of '79, for instance, when the snow dumped in the parks was not yet melted on Memorial Day and mid-winter depressions lasted until the parades on the Fourth of July. Even in families, there are tales that new in-laws have to hear: It's Not Christmas Without Creamed Onions, or perhaps The Night the Bed Fell. I have a friend, a church stalwart, the sort of character whom Barbara Pym might call an "excellent woman." She admitted recently that she is a direct descendent of Bluebeard the Pirate. I think that adds a certain edge to the Women's Guild these days, and I wonder anyone has yet told the new rector. But mostly I wonder what it's worth to her son, a fourteen year old of remarkably small stature.

Stories do more than establish and sustain relationships among people. Stories also mediate between large or culturally general conceptual structures and individual experience. In particular, both stories as such and storytelling as a social act are vitally important in establishing and sustaining religious faith, because it is in our stories that doctrinal theology demonstrates its value in supporting the traditions that support us. I can most easily explain how this works by comparison to the more familiar operations of science.

Doctrinal Theology as Paradigm

In scientific research, the formal process called "scientific method" mediates between the inchoate flow of all possible particular observations about, say, the migrations of birds, and governing paradigms that are or that provide relevant conceptual models within which explanations are possible. Only within a prior conceptual model of birds' needs and their abilities and their interactions with their environment can an ornithologist even begin to ask and to answer specific and meaningful questions about migration. For instance, the model that we have precludes the possibility that birds find their way either by

communicating with military satellites or by the benevolent instruction of Mother Nature. A working paradigm makes some potential explanations meaningful and some just nonsense. Theories are instances of such explanation; and particular experiments pose and endeavor to answer detailed questions that will articulate or develop further some little corner of a theory already proposed.

For instance, I read once about a study that provided a migratory flock with so much food that they would never migrate simply because they were hungry. And after several such studies it was concluded that some species will stay, despite the cold, if there is food and depending upon how cold is "cold"; others species leave, no matter what. But none of them stop at the first warm place with food, and neither food nor weather explains the routes taken, the navigational decisions, or the ways in which the flock organizes itself upon departing. A good experiment, a fruitful experiment, makes new experiments possible and meaningful. That's the process Thomas Kuhn calls "normal science."⁶

So too, theology offers a complex array of what Sallie McFague forthrightly calls "models of God" that evolve over time just as scientific models do--although competing models coexist for much longer and in much less tidy ways than one finds for scientific paradigms.⁷ In fact, Kuhn proposes that part of what makes a given scholarly activity "science" is precisely this disciplined, progressive succession of paradigms. But intermediate between elegant theological paradigms and the endless, mindless flow of days, day after day, we still have that individual figure standing in a field by a river bank, watching a dove descend and wondering what it all means. Whether this character is an ornithologist asking questions about the migrations of birds or a believer thinking about the great-winged spirit of God hovering over creation, the inquiring mind has available a sophisticated array of processes whereby to ask the questions that need to be asked and to seek the answers that these questions make possible. For some questions, the relevant processes are what we call "science."

But for other question, the relevant processes are the devices, strategies and conventions whereby stories are created and told.

Stories, then, are something like experiments. They are trials and tests. They are attempts to collect and analyze some "data set," some series of events, in ways that explore or extend or challenge some part of the paradigm or construct by which we make sense of how the world works or what life means. Experience is puzzling, and stories are attempts to solve those puzzles, to attain to the insight and to the meaning inherent within or promised by the constructs upon which we rely. As scientists know, one cannot collect meaningful data without an hypothesis; but hypotheses are derived from one's creative insight into the governing paradigm. One cannot tell a story that makes sense without pulling relevant episodes from the fast waters of time and circumstance, from the rapids of history and memory (or invention, which is a variety of memory⁸). But one cannot make that selection, one cannot dive into those depths and emerge with the necessary stone, without a model-governed prior notion of what constitutes "making sense." Within faith communities, or in the storytelling that constitutes the life of faith, we are guided by and we are endlessly engaging and deepening and extending and disputing and, yes, even revising a paradigmatic vision of God as the coherence behind any sense we hope to make.

As Kuhn recounts in specific and historical detail, paradigms themselves are individual experiments now taken as exemplary, as a model or a pattern for other thinkers to follow. If we take Kuhn's study as itself paradigmatic of the historical operations of creative and critical thinking in the West, we can imagine that behind the doctrine as such, the theological paradigm as such, there is a story. There is a human experience, an event or a series of events, and there is a community in which and for whom both the experience and the story became exemplary of God and of their connection to God. Some of these stories are in Scripture; some are in other kinds of texts, both sacred and secular; some, no

doubt, have simply been lost or have left only elusive records demanding such delicate reconstruction as we lavish upon the shards of other arts.

I realize that this is quite a peculiar way in which to regard the arcane reaches of Christian doctrine. It can be understood as an array of testable claims about the historical record, claims that as a modern-language literary critic I am not trained to investigate (nor, as an independent writer, situated to explore). More to the point, for my purposes here, this way of framing the issues involves the claim that valid or meaningful doctrine has (must have) a rich and specifiable connection to human experience or else fall liable to David Hume's devastating argument that theology is but decadent word-games and fraudulent imitations of inquiry.⁹ Doctrine, in short, is an abstraction, a simplification or codification, something less and not more than the original tales.

Story and Doctrine

Religious experience easily demonstrates how our own stories and storytelling create and sustain the link between the fragmented, partly-conscious flow of highly particular experience and the large, abstract, conceptual structures or paradigms provided by systematic theology and doctrine. On the one hand, religious faith can be identified strictly or simply with the paradigm as such: "faith" can be defined as understanding and assenting to one or another formulation of a complex array of doctrines: sacrament, sin, redemption, forgiveness, grace, covenant, call, the Trinity, etc., etc. Each of these doctrines interlock with all the others; all of them are dense, abstract, complicated, arcane, and, in various ways, fodder for ongoing sectarian contempt of one another. But "religion" names a domain much more extensive than doctrine as such defines. Faith is much more than knowing and assenting to complex metaphysical doctrines.

And so, on the other hand, faith can be defined not as intellectual and moral assent to complicated theological formulations but rather as living consciously in relationship to God. Faith can be defined not as a form of knowledge or as an act of agreement but rather as a fundamentally imaginative act, as the creative capacity to perceive the Holy that permeates and sustains all

the little gritty details otherwise known as "the real world." It is such recognitions--and not formal metaphysical systems--that give meaning to our lives. Faith can be defined as a creative, imaginative energy manifest as or in the aesthetic integrity that renders coherent all the habits, disciplines, practices, etc. that constitute the religious life. Faith is the imaginative prowess whereby the whole of one's habits and disciplines is greater than the sum of the parts; faith synthesizes the form which informs and is inseparable from its specific content.¹⁰

I had lunch with a clergyman yesterday, the new pastor of a Presbyterian congregation not far from here and the friend of a friend who kept calling long-distance insisting we had to meet. He told me about a very successful young businessman, once a member of his congregation, who bought a mansion on a three acre lakefront property far north on Chicago's wealthy north shore--and then felt that there was something obscene about earning so much money and furthermore spending it on an increasingly luxurious and even glamorous lifestyle. So he put the mansion up for sale again, moved into a modest apartment, and returned to his former congregation, showing up in the pastor's study amidst a terrible crisis about what to do with his life and with his wealth and with his substantial talents. My ordained friend had as yet no idea about how this story would end. But it is quite reasonably clear where the story must have started: in a faithful narrative world in which "obscene" might come to include simply using your abilities to earn a perfectly honest living working for an investment fund--and then keeping that salary all for yourself.

And that tale reminded me of a story in turn (that is how all this works). When I was a small child, no more than eight years old, we lived in a brownstone two-flat in the native-Irish ghetto on Chicago's west side. It was a working-class urban neighborhood teeming with children, ordinarily eight or ten to a household, boys in one bedroom, girls in the other. When my mother baked bread, she always made three loaves, and she always gave one away--or, more precisely, she gave one to me and sent me off to a neighbor. It was the only time I was let

out of the house alone after dark. I was afraid of the sound of my steps in the enclosed gloom of the back stairs, painted navy-surplus battleship gray. I was afraid of the shadows cast by city streetlamps and the way headlights sliced across the sidewalk when a car turned left. The hot loaf was tucked inside my coat, which could not then be buttoned, and I remember the cold winter air on my neck despite the steamy warmth of the bread against my chest. I do not remember the smell of the bread on these dangerous journeys.

But I do remember how mad I was, how mad we all were, that she always gave a loaf away. But she was adamant. She always gave a loaf away because her mother always had, because to be blessed bread had to be shared, and not in her kitchen would there be eating of unblessed bread. It did not matter to her that the loaves she gave away were finer loaves--lighter, more skillfully made--than the loaves arriving in turn at our back door. And that was not thought of as Eucharistic theology, although of course it was. It was not thought about at all. It was living as life had always been lived, and the reason for it was not a theory but a traditional practice.

When I was in my middle thirties my mother stopped by unexpectedly as I taking bread out of my own oven.

"Two loaves?" she huffed. "And what will you be doing with two loaves?" I offered her one. She eyed it and me with equal suspicion.

"With smaller pans, that batch would give you three," she commented, finally. "There's no need for such big loaves. Smaller will do, and then there's three." She looked at me again, her face harsh with perplexity and a suspicious disapproval, caught, no doubt not for the first time, between her daughter with the doctorate and the memory of her mother, for whom I am named, her mother who had but three or four years of schooling altogether, in rural Ulster.

Without the Eucharistic theology, the three-loaves habit is hard to distinguish from peasant superstition, and I admit I came late to respect for such things. And yet without the practice, without the habits shaping the lives of those sitting in the pews, what happens at the Eucharist deteriorates just as profoundly,

descending into superstition or else evaporating into meaningless arcana and nostalgic sentimentality, into wordgames worth less than a hot loaf of bread, into mere notions no better than tasteless bits of store-bought stuff and half a sip of sugary grapejuice.

I suspect that my Grandmother Murphy would have known how to name the troubles faced by the fine young man who found himself so unhappy in his new house: it was not blessed. Or perhaps was bought with unblessed money. One way or the other, of course he choked on it. Faith, by this measure, is not something you know or understand. It is something you have learned to do; it is far more closely kin to a craft or an art that no one masters but by doing it, under persistent supervision by an elder. Its coherence is not physically demonstrable causal systems, but the symbolic and psychological tropes and figures within which spiritual lives are lived.

Roberta Bondi argues that work of theologians is connecting individual spiritual experience with the great received heritage of doctrine; but that work, she explains, consists in the telling of our stories.¹¹ Marcus Borg explains how, in his own life, intellectual assent to doctrines felt meaningless until he understood that the immediate experience of God was indeed part of his own ordinary life; at that point, his own stories about his own life started making sense in a whole new way and his commitment to the work of theology gained a tremendous new energy.¹² Wendy Farley laments the distortions introduced into doctrine when doctrine dominates worship to the exclusion of stories and practices that arise from encounters with the immediate presence of an omnipresent God.¹³ The life of faith, the liveliness and the vitality of religion in our day, depends very centrally upon the stories we tell one another about our own immediate encounters with an incarnate God. And the work of "spiritual formation" as such, then, is learning to understand and to tell the stories that will teach us how to recognize God's activity in our own ordinary week.

As a community of believers, as the church as such regardless of sect, we need both doctrine and storytelling. I'm convinced of that. To be the church, to

care for the church and to see to its future (and even its diversity) among us--in short, to sustain a vital tradition of spiritual formation--we need both the intellectual rigor of doctrinal theology and the rigorous immediacy of powerful stories. We need both if we are truly and fully to understand what it means to travel deep into the canyons of relationship to God, through the rapids and between the cliffs of what it means to set loose your raft on the power of God. Without the wisdom that is doctrine, we are all too apt to drown in the classic temptations of narcissism and egotism, greed and sentimentality. Storytelling can break down into the voyeurism and exhibitionism of that plague support groups or that characterize so much of call-in radio and daytime TV at their most decadent.

A useful doctrine, like any other useful or vital paradigm, creatively guides our observation of our own lives, asking questions that can indeed be answered, directing our attention toward puzzles that can indeed be solved, offering methods of inquiry and of reflection that will indeed yield interesting, coherent, and useful results. At the moment, it seems to me, the American Buddhist community is succeeding brilliantly at providing doctrines that function in this way. The people (churched and unchurched) who turn to me for talk about God seem more than a bit astounded by the possibility that Christianity has a heritage just as lively.

To be understood and to function in this way, however, doctrine must sustain its own identity as exemplar, as exemplary tale rendered paradigmatic because it is, finally, symbolic of some aspect of the relationship between the holy and the human. Doctrine and systematic theology are not, from this perspective, the first-cousins once-removed in-law of calculus and astronomy and aerospace engineering, but rather something much closer to shorthand or abstract accounts of rich and ancient human experiences that are fully recorded only in stories. And yet, as Sandra Schneiders explicates in such elegant detail, to recover an ancient story is no small task.¹⁴ As Kuhn recounts in his descriptions of science education and training, the initiate, the novice practitioner,

is above all trained in slow and specific ways to perceive the reality of realities otherwise not simply invisible but unimaginable. Spiritual formation likewise depends upon the hearing and the telling of the stories that tell us about the reality of God.

We live the life of faith in and through the stories that testify that God is real, that growth is possible, that hope has meaning, that none of our suffering and none of our failures will ever finally destroy us, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Christian community is a reservoir of such stories, a reservoir dug millennias ago by the storytellers of Scripture but one to which every little congregation keeps adding, week by week by week, when we listen to others' stories alert to recognize the sly, improbable interference of the Holy Spirit, the unscrupulous wit of a God determined to deconstruct our terror that life is indeed cold, nasty, brutish and short. We need to know what we are doing in this enterprise, and we can do so both by recognizing what treasure we have in the earthen vessels of ordinary storytelling and by understanding that theology and doctrine derive from and depend upon not the standards of algebra or even sociology or epistemology but rather the immediate, mundane storytelling life and practices of the community.

How Stories Change the World

When we tell a story, we create a world: what we say is so.¹⁵ If we say, "it was a dark and stormy night" then there is night--and the night is good, because that's what our story needs, that's what we intend at this point in the telling. In creating a world, we create a new place, a new reality that is--inevitably--a revision of the ordinary world. And this revision can help in a small but potent way to change that ordinary world.

Let me explain how. A story is a narrative of events that constitute a single, complex, coherent action, one that has a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. (That goes all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics*.) The events we recount can be exterior events: "I took a new job and moved to Cleveland." They can be

interior events: "I stopped feeling so panicky on elevators." But whether visibly, on an exterior landscape or invisibly, in the silent forests of the soul, something happens. And the telling of the happening of it begins at some reasonable moment, goes for awhile, and then comes to what feels like a convincing conclusion. Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends.

Life doesn't. Life just starts some day before you remember and flows past day after day after day. Maybe it all stops when you die--but maybe not. One way or another, the experience of living is usually without the kind of obvious thematic coherence we find in a well-told tale. Real life is usually all too much like an incoherent, boring movie: miscellaneous disconnected events follow one another, but often we have is no clear and self-evident sense of what is going on in our lives and why, or what's important and what's detail. Scene after scene muddles past, exactly like those days all of us know all too well in which we feel both terribly busy and entirely unproductive. If life in the ordinary weeks of our lives were a movie, most of us would probably hit "rewind" and decide to go do some laundry instead. It is an effort, a rich but weary effort, to make coherent sense of our own lives. And we know it is an effort, because we are doing it all the time, week after week, day after day: we work to make sense of our lives, no matter how much revision is demanded by our own creative and moral and aesthetic commitments, no matter how many cups of coffee we drink with sympathetic friends.

Unlike the immediate experience of the "real" world of an ordinary week, the world of a story has a dramatic and narrative shape. It has what we intuitively recognize as "meaning." A story has a shape that is a meaning because what turns an event into a story is the storyteller's intuitive, ordinary, plain human skill at creating a plot structure. Creating plot structure is something we do as naturally as walking. When we link the moments or stages or episodes of an event into a plot, we create something that is or can be called "dramatic causality." Dramatic causality is whatever "explains" or "accounts for" the turn of events in the plot. Dramatic causality is our gut sense, as the audience of the

story, that what is happening makes sense, that events "follow" in a meaningful way. And because dramatic causality accounts for the turn of events in the plot, the world of the story has much clearer rules, much clearer meanings, than life has on its own. At least at a gut level, we understand why things happen as they do in a well-told tale (or at least a well-told tale that is not radically postmodern in its narrative structure). Understanding why things happen as they do in our lives is tremendously more difficult. But that's because a story is a far simpler thing than a life. A story is far less equivocal than actual experience, far less uncertain.

Except at the fringes of experimental fiction, stories have patterns of dramatic causality--"rules," if you will, or "ideas" or what high school English teachers call "themes"--that hold things together, that "explain" why things happen. These explanations are not rigorously logical, systematically demonstrable and reproducible proofs but rather dramatic pictures, little sketches that truly depict--even if in sketchy ways--our innate and intuitive or paradigmatic sense of how the world works. The better the story as a story, as a dramatic unity, the more clearly it will present its main idea or the better it will subordinate and unify all of the raw and unruly components it pulls from the mayhem that is life itself. Good stories are tightly organized but never unduly predictable: dramatic tension, dramatic uncertainty, is crucial. Good stories are focused and economical and finely coherent, but never preachy or cheaply manipulative. As readers or as listeners we are likely to argue about how to define the idea or the themes, about how all the parts fit together into this lovely whole: that used to be among the principal tasks of the literary critic, after all. But any experienced reader or listener also knows, full well and gut level, that a good story makes a certain kind of good sense in some more or less straightforward way.

Life is not like that. Life itself is anything but simple and straightforward. And yet most of us do remarkably well at telling stories about our own lives. Most of us, most of the time, can organize that uproar and that muddlement into reasonably coherent stories. Because literary criticism taught me to listen to stories in conscious and disciplined ways, I ordinarily notice the degree of

economy and coherence in the stories my friends tell me. It's just something I notice spontaneously, as I suppose hair stylists notice haircuts or speech therapists notice the roll of an "r". And I am regularly amazed by the technical skill with which stories are told by ordinary folks who are without literary ambitions of any kind.

I suppose my physical-therapist first-cousin once-removed in-law would watch us run down the stairs to the laundry room with something like the same awe. What a thing it is to be human! Running down the stairs is not dancing with the American Ballet Theatre, and telling a simple autobiographical story over lunch is not writing a novel. But making sense of our lives is crucial to our happiness and to our humanity and to our life in the presence of God. And most of us make sense of our lives with marvelous skill. The gift and the artistry of a good story are present in our every-day social storytelling just as in the various formal narrative arts.

We need always to acknowledge that our lives, even at their best, are not tightly focused and elegantly coherent. Real lives are awash in chaos and ambiguity and uncertainty, in suffering and pain and fear. That why we need stories, I suppose--because stories let us escape the chaos of life for a while, stories help us to survive the mayhem and the drudgery, stories help us to imagine some order and some meaning within the tedious uproar of the ordinary week. In our stories, we can create worlds in which it is clear that people are kind, or that fortitude and hard work pay off, or that we have resources of strength and courage that we never knew we had. Or--of course--we can tell stories in which everything is always terrible and hopes are always disappointed and needs are never met. I know people who always tell that kind of story. I bet you do too. And that's why we are profoundly blessed by stories that encourage us in the face of disaster, that make sense of our lives in the presence of pain, and that connect us to vital and life-giving traditions. Otherwise, I suppose, we are left to whatever stories Hollywood has to offer this month.

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that whatever counts as virtue in our lives, whatever counts as true, as noble, as worthwhile, as reliable and as certain-- these virtues are defined and preserved in our storytelling or they are lost. There is no "scientific" proof of the objective value of fidelity or integrity or kindness. There are no double-blind controlled studies statistically proving the value of courtesy or forgiveness or courage. There are no rigorous philosophic demonstrations, no tough-minded proofs. There are only stories, stories that testify to the dignity and the hope and the humanity of virtuous lives.

It is in telling such stories about our own lives that we discover what our lives mean, what our values are, what differences our virtues make, and how we are connected to the past and to the community in vital ways. And it is in sharing our stories that we grow in the virtues that provide whatever we know of honor and serenity and hope, because the virtues are sustained and transmitted and taught through storytelling and not by means of abstract, systematic argument. The world becomes a kinder place when you tell three other people about someone's kindness to you. The world becomes a more honorable place when you tell them about honest decisions you made or saw someone make. The world becomes a more courageous and cheerful place when you recount your troubles and how you nonetheless survived with your sense of humor intact.

In short, stories change the world. The world changes in all of these ways because your story encourages me to act or to feel in certain ways by immersing me--just for a while--in a created world in which the power and the importance and the meaning of virtue are much clearer than they ever can be in "real life." Sandra Schneiders argues that when we hear a good story we are changed because we have experienced something that ordinary life does not commonly provide. We have come face to face with new possibilities, with new grounds for hope, with new support for the struggle of our own lives. When we leave the world of a story we walk out changed, she says, because now we will see our own lives in a new light. Our sense of life's possibilities can be permanently changed or enlarged.

If every night over dinner you tell your kids some story--even a very small and simple story--admiring some small bit of honesty or kindness you have seen that day, or maybe rejoicing in the chance you had to be kind or generous or straightforward, then your kids will grow up to be kinder, more honest, more generous, and more cheerful. If every night you complain about the evidence you have seen that people are just out for themselves and nobody can be trusted, your kids will grow up to be suspicious and distant. The stories we tell create the world. And that dynamic informs our lives as believers no less profoundly. Church community, as a reservoir of stories and storytelling, can create a world in which God is stunningly real and present, in which grace is reliably given, in which growth is possible and hope has meaning.

Stories Change History

Stories do more than change the world. Stories change history. We cannot change the mere facts of the past, of course. I was born in a particular place, to a particular family, in a particular year--and none of that can be changed. But what we can change--and what we do change, over time--is the stories we tell about our own past.

Mary Catherine Bateson explains something about how this happens.¹⁶ As we tell and retell our personal history, she says, we remember best those events that prefigure the present, and we tend to forget or at least to gloss over events that don't contribute to the narrative whole we are trying to create or to find in the stories that make up our lives. A good life-story, she explains, integrates the past in ways that both make sense of today and give us hope for tomorrow. What that means, of course, is that when something new or unexpected comes into your life, any time that grace or grief disrupt your status quo, your stories about your own past will shift in some way. Her image for this process is "improvisation," as jazz musicians improvise. Fluid circumstance and accident are but members of the band.

Notice, however, that this dynamic operates in either direction. You can also open yourself to change in the present by deliberately and critically reconsidering the stories you have commonly told about your past. The experience sometimes called "conversion"--the process of becoming aware for the first time of God's reality and God's immediate presence in one's life--classically tends not only to change the future directions of a life but also to prompt a whole new envisioning of the past. Psychotherapy plays its own variations upon this theme, of course.

Stories change history in yet another way. Stories can change history when people start swapping stories with one another. Your story about your life prompts me to look for essentially similar narratives in my own life. We do this all the time. You tell me about a mishap on your vacation, and I'll respond with a mishap story of my own, or a vacation story of my own. It's a conversational form of duet. What holds the duet together, however--a major cultural rule of such exchanges--is that contradicting the major theme of the first story is very rude. The range of polite variation is in fact quite narrow, such that there are elaborate social formulas to follow when disagreement is necessary. Furthermore, it is also rude--or at least extremely gauche--to tell a tale utterly remote from any potential answering tale the listeners might tell. Those who persist and tell a second tale, a third, convict themselves of social egotism of a particularly unforgiven sort.

Thus it is that we come to understand our lives within the patterns of significant event and dramatic causality that are common in our culture or in our community or at least in our circle of friends. That shared set of meanings is what makes good support groups supportive. And it is what sustains the vitality of the spiritual formation that happens within faith communities. We are taught to recognize the themes and characters and major features of the stories of people who are relatively expert in the sensitive perception of God's presence. And part of that process is mastering the vocabulary and the systematic constructs called "doctrine," mastering them not as "scientific" propositions but as exemplary or archetypal stories that literally inform one's own experience.

Storytelling and Moral Responsibility

Jill Ker Conway argues that we are likely to live out our lives uncritically playing our parts within the archetypal "plots" or "story lines" or "mythic patterns" that popular culture supplies.¹⁷ Maybe at some level we are convinced that all our problems will be solved if we can just marry Prince Charming or rescue the helpless Princess, because then of course we will live happily ever after. That's how the story always ends, after all, in movies no less than in folklore. And so we keep kissing toads and hoping, or diligently searching for castle dungeons.

Or maybe life will be solved once and for all after we slay some dragon: vanquish disapproving parents; lose twenty pounds; get that promotion; move somewhere warmer than Chicago. If only . . . then happily ever after. Or maybe we are on a heroic quest for some achievement or some acquisition that will prove that we are good people or justify our existence--our own private version of the Grail Quest.

I'm very keen on Grail Quests. For a long time I was convinced that my life would be redeemed once I wrote a book. I wrote a book. Nothing happened. A whole carton of free copies arrived on my front porch one day fifteen years ago, but there was no brass band and no choir of angels and I still didn't know what to fix for dinner. But I didn't give up. Not me! I set myself a new goal: balancing the bank statement on time three months running. That proved a more difficult feat than writing a book. After a decade of failure I bought a computer program that does most of it for me. Alas, I discovered that balancing the bank statement didn't work any better than writing a book. No brass band, no choir of angels, just accurate records of how much I spend buying groceries for three teenagers. "When ignorance is bliss . . ."

Just recently I recognized that my current Grail Quest centers on the diningroom table. Some persistent part of me is utterly convinced that my whole life would be better if I could just keep that table cleared off . . . Meanwhile, of course, I've written a couple of other books and a respectable stack of essays. I've taught and talked and preached and overcome a mildly phobic dislike of

elevators. I've hung wallpaper, forty-three rolls, half-drop match. I sang a solo at a wedding, and I've scrubbed most of that third-generation lilt from my voice. But no matter: some part of me keeps waiting for the Blue Bird of Happiness to land on my shoulder, ruffle its feathers, and announce (think Humphrey Bogart) "Hey kid! You have finally Made It!"

Unless we are watching, that is, unless we are listening critically to our own stories and unless we are telling stories to empathic but thoughtful friends, we can live too much of our lives trapped within the same weary old plots, fighting to get to some happy ending that only Hollywood can supply. And that's because in telling stories about ourselves we are not just reporting the past but also creating our own futures. We come into a world chock-full of stories that will, for better or for worse, shape the stories we tell about ourselves. Some of these stories are dangerous. They can be seductive and distorting. And some of these stories are charged with the grandeur of God, the abundance of eternal life, and the compassionate courage of the Christ. So it pays to pay attention, to notice what we are doing to ourselves and to other people with the stories that we tell. The dramatic causality of a convincing story is among the most powerful forms of causality on earth.

If you will indulge me with a little mental exercise, I can show you something of how stories and storytelling can change history. Imagine, if you will, some era of your own life, and from that era pick some memory or some event that is typical of that time, some story you might tell to me. Don't fuss: whatever comes first to mind will do just fine. Now hang onto your story for a minute while I point out the predicament I have put you in.

Consider, for a moment, how much would be involved if you actually were to try to tell me this story you have in mind. We don't know one another. So in telling me the story, you would have to provide the context I need to understand what this event meant in your life at that time and of course what it means now. But in creating that context, in fleshing out the simple memory into a whole story, you would have to be very selective or telling the story would take months. A

friend of mine teaches a course in biography and autobiography, and he starts out by observing that if someone videotaped every event in your life, soon enough you would need a whole warehouse just to store the tapes, and it would take yet another whole lifetime just to watch all of them once--and that doesn't begin to include realities that can't be videotaped, realities like dreams or fears or arguments with yourself in the middle of the night. So in telling your story, you have to focus on what really matters. But what really matters? That's a big question. What do you think really matters in your life? Questions don't get much bigger than that.

Russell Baker explains that when you are telling a story about yourself, the problem is that you know too much.¹⁸ There are a million things that might be said. You have to pick. The solution, he says, is to leave out almost everything. A good story is not the whole truth. It's about one-half of one percent of the whole truth, because that's about all that will fit into a good story. What we are doing in picking that one-half of one percent is deciding what contexts will matter.

God is a context that matters. Exodus from bondage is a context that matters; forgiveness and redemption, grace and exile and calling. We can situate ourselves as self-actualized individuals just brimming with self-esteem and low-fat high-fiber values, or we can situate ourselves as vulnerable, compassionate creatures made in the image of a God who calls us out of mere success into service, out of mere competition into compassion, out of the dark into a light that darkness cannot comprehend. We can situate ourselves in a world in which all we do is fight over a glass that is always half empty; we can situate ourselves in a world in which the cup is brimful and shared. In the kingdom of God there are no zero-sum calculations: the only measure is one that is packed down and overflowing.

The other context that matters is the audience, the listener. Every story has an audience, real or hoped-for, because storytelling is a social act. We cannot tell the stories in which hope has foundations unless we have listeners who also know that hope is possible, that grace is real, that God is mysterious

but indisputably present. We cannot find what it takes to tell the stories in which we change this nasty brutish world into the kingdom of God unless we have listeners for whom such transformation is possible--even if only now and then or briefly. We cannot tell the stories in which history is changed unless we have listeners for whom conversion or repentance or moral growth can be imagined. And theology is or articulates the conceptual structures or paradigms that underlie how it is that all these individuals, with all their stories and all their listening, comprise a coherent tradition sustained over time and despite massive cultural change.

The two great commandments, we are told, are to love God with your whole heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. Ultimately, of course, we know that the two demands are one, because each properly understood or fully achieved both presupposes and elicits the other. And so it is with storytelling. The storytelling that grounds our relationships with one another also grounds our relationship with God: we find the creative and sustaining presence of God as an animating power within our lives through the hearing and the telling of stories that attest to God's reality. Our creative storytelling sustains us as living members of the network of relationships and histories that theologians call "the risen body of the living Christ."

¹ Hear Emily Dickinson: "I died for Beauty--but was scarce", which is #449 in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960).

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984).

³ Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990).

⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵ Mary Field Belenky, et al, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986).

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- ⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- ⁷ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
- ⁸ Mary Shelley, in her introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel, explains this rhetorical commonplace as well as anyone ever has: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of a void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded . . ." *Frankenstein*, ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 22.
- ⁹ David Hume, *Enquires concerning the Human Understanding*, 1748. Hume's argument remains the classic text for a variety of reasons, including its appearance amidst the intellectual milieu in which recognizably modern science was also emerging.
- ¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas offers the same vision of faith from another perspective and in strictly theological terms in his account of the relationship between beliefs and behavior in "On doctrine and ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 21-40.
- ¹¹ Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).
- ¹² Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
- ¹³ Wendy Farley, "Works and Grace: Reflections on Religious Practice and the Ubiquity of God," *Theology Today* (Winter, 1995):449-457.
- ¹⁴ Sanda M. Scheiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
- ¹⁵ This sentence and several that follow, scattered here and there in the ensuing discussion, are repeated (with permission) from a single paragraph of *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), pp. 139-40. In a more general way, this paper develops much further certain claims I make about storytelling in that book, particularly in Chapter Five, "Teaching Ethics to Kids".
- ¹⁶ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1990)
- ¹⁷ Jill Ker Conway, "Points of Departure," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, rev. ed. , ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1995)
- ¹⁸ Russell Baker, "Life With Mother," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. rev. ed. , ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1995).