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Caught Between Stories: A Narrative Approach to Worldview for Christian Professionals - Chapter 8 in "Bridging the Gap: Connecting Christian Faith and Professional Practice"

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CHAPTER 8.
CAUGHT BETWEEN STORIES: A
NARRATIVE APPROACH TO WORLDVIEW
FOR CHRISTIAN PROFESSIONALS

Ted Newell and Ken Badley

*O pirates, yes they rob I;
sold I to the merchant ships,
minutes after they took I
from the bottomless pit.
But my hand was made strong
by the hand of the Almighty.
Triumphantly we forward in this generation.
Won't you help to sing
these songs of freedom?
'cause all I ever have:
redemption songs, redemption songs.*

Some might recognize the epigraph as a lyric from the singer Bob Marley. Part of its pleasure lies in hearing the singer's story as we track changes in the song's point of view. The singer tells of being trapped into slavery, shifting perspective to sing of a freedom by direct divine action. His narrative enables a white middle class professional person of privilege—me—to understand the narrator as singer of liberatory songs, in a vocation of encouragement, of hope, and dare I say, of giving glory to his god.

As leader of the final year required course in worldview at a liberal arts university, I (Ted) encourage students to move their hard-won academic knowledge into a larger framework of meaningfulness. For Christian students of education, the movement takes the shape of realizing that newfound knowledge is not neutral but must be used consciously for the Lord in each classroom setting. For non-Christian student teachers, or not-alert Christian students, this movement of academic knowledge into a larger framework of meaningfulness involves realizing that their

new knowledge is not neutral and will be shaping their pupils in definite ways as human beings. Teachers are always forming pupils in one image or another.

Following the meaning of *educare*, teacher educators draw out the potential of our students. We are edifiers who aim to build up structures of good in their lives. We seek to form professionals for Christ. Yet propositions about reality, as important as they are, hold little appeal for our students. Narrative is how they live; it is how they are moved and it is how to move them. It is not even enough to say that the cognitive must be also affective and behavioral, for to do so indicates simply an add-on mentality. The structure of our educative effort needs to ring true with the ways that students and people in general are moved, that is, by story. The information is to be carried by a story that moves people, or the informing work will not resonate in the lives of the students.

Bob Marley was a black man from Jamaica, a poor man by birth, a Rastafarian by religion. His vocation was pop singer but within that to be an encourager of Rastafarianism among poor youth in Jamaica. His message was that God will help and history is on our side if we side with God. But Marley can speak to me because I rewrite him for myself; he addresses universal human themes and his god is not totally different from my God. "Redemption Song" echoes "This poor man cried to the Lord and he heard me" (Psalm 34:6). As professor, I am no longer my students' age—but I must choose not to hide my life behind a lectern or a wall of words. I must strive to connect my students' narratives with the largest possible narrative.

Professionalism

What is the current professionalism for which we train students? Classically, a professional is one who has "specialized training in a field of codified knowledge usually acquired by formal education and apprenticeship... and a commitment to provide service to the public that goes beyond the economic welfare of the practitioner" (Sullivan, 1995, p. 36). However, such a definition seems dated. Professions are adapting to the rationalizing demands of the marketplace, claims Sullivan. A new ideal for the professional has emerged; it is less the specially educated person dedicated to the public good who accepts the discipline of a professional body, and more the expert who offers special services to the public. The difference between the former and the latter is that the marketplace's marginalization of morality is now visible in the realm of the professional as well. In North America, one need only say "Enron" to summon

to mind the moral bankruptcy of some professionals. The result of the marginalization of morality, says Sullivan, is a crisis of identity in the professions. In his words, "The emphasis upon the efficiency of markets, which in practice often means stimulating competition, threatens essential features of the professional-client relationship" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 18). Sullivan's comment applies to many professions. Practitioners experience powerlessness, and their leaders and professional societies seem unable to respond.

Yet public standards for professionals will sometimes conflict with Christian standards. For example, in the province of Ontario, Canada, the governing College of Physicians and Surgeons proposed that doctors' personal views on the sanctity of life were to be suppressed so that any doctor would be required to provide information to patients on abortion or euthanasia. After meeting stiff resistance, the proposal was watered down. A second example of conflicting standards: At the university at which one of us teaches, psychology faculty members are members also of the national psychological association. The association has adopted socially dominant understandings of homosexuality as genetically determined. An association member who teaches that homosexual orientation may be remedied is liable to be reported for breaching professional ethics. These teachers work in a private university, teaching a New Testament account of homosexuality, but as association members, they risk their livelihood if they exercise academic freedom. Their response is to avoid conflict by teaching lightly about homosexuality. Conflicts with conscientiously held beliefs arise not only in the formal justice system and in public controversies, but also in the pressures exerted by professional codes.

In light of the changing identity of professionals and supra-national standards and codes, Christian higher education has an opportunity to show a significant difference to the wider society by training ethically aware and committed professionals. Without the faith perspective, no reason suffices for Christian universities to devote resources to training professionals. Christian higher education's distinctive task remains the integration of faith and learning.

Worldview

As anxious as students may be to become professionals, teachers in the Kuyperian tradition must desire more than to train professionals. Heirs of the antithesis will wish for professionals who live out the antithesis between Christ and world, who exercise the discernment enabling them

to stand for Christ against subtle pressures for conformity, who bear the marks of the cross in daily life, and who make career sacrifices for the sake of Christ. Teachers in the Kuyperian tradition must desire students who are able and willing to observe the line, to cross which means to sunder faith and true self from professional life. The bland phrase *integration of faith and learning* hardly indicates the stakes. *Worldview*, often used to acknowledge relativity of belief and practice, is a means of discernment for Christian higher education.

The advantage of a worldview approach has always been that it has an eye for all of life in its purview, not only its cognitive side, but also affirmations tacit in a society. Kuyper's original insight was to adopt the relativist and historicist term *worldview* to show that Christianity was not a private concern of religious individuals but a public alternative with coherent proposals for politics, education, the family, the arts and all areas of society. Against secular proposals for revolution or reform, Christianity also offered robust options. On Wolters' account, worldview is the mediating concept between faith and practice (Wolters, 2009). This virtue of worldview will be of interest to a conference on training Christian students for the professions. But like the bias of theology toward the cognitive or intellectual side of life, worldview thinking often becomes overly propositional, as evidenced by several of the more popular Christian books dealing with worldview (Naugle, 2002; Sire, 1976, 1978).

The significance of a narrative approach for Christian higher education is nothing less than an ability to translate thought into experience or discipleship. The linguistic/hermeneutical turn in philosophy since Wittgenstein wrote of language games in the 1950s and Thomas Kuhn wrote of paradigms in the 1960s has significant potential yield toward a lived Christian faith by undergraduates. By explicitly bringing into consideration the dimensions of time, history and culture, worldview moves from a static conception to dynamic. Human beings are beings in time. Paul Ricoeur's three volumes translated as *Narrative and Time* (Ricoeur, 1984–1988, in addition to several articles), were perhaps the first systematic account of narrative's power to relate worlds. Alasdair MacIntyre showed that the development of virtues or habits requires that life be understood as a narrative (MacIntyre, 1984). A coherent, continuous sense of living is an indispensable prerequisite to character development. These developments have certainly not gone unrecognized in scholarship generally or in Christian scholarship. However, they have not been assimilated into the mainstream of worldview theory where they could do much good.

Challenges

The schools of education in which we both teach, deal with specific challenges related to faith and learning integration. We suggest that a narrative conception of worldview would better assist us to respond well to two specific challenges. First, ours are historically Christian institutions that desire to offer explicitly Christian education, but whose professional programs attract many non-Christian students. Our understandings of teaching a Christian worldview seem more suited to traditional undergraduate education than to graduate education. Our use of faith-learning language seems similarly unsuited. Second, the conversation about Christian worldview and about faith-learning integration have been, up until now, largely about articulating a series of answers to questions such as "What is the Christian view of history?" Many students who identify themselves as Christian articulate their faith commitment less as adherence to propositions and more with reference to ethical matters as compassion in nursing, care in teaching, integrity and service in business and concern for the environment in engineering. Schools of education that have relied historically on *worldview* or *integration* language need new ways to discuss Christian conviction.

We believe a narrative conception of worldview offers the following four benefits:

First: A narrative approach coheres with the way that personal identity develops.

If, as we claimed above, the challenge of Christian higher education is to help students to move academic knowledge into life-relevant knowledge, narrative offers a way forward. Identity develops in dialogue with the stories of culture. We alter our views of where we were before depending on where we are now, what Berger calls *alternation* or *rewriting our biography* (Berger, 1967). Our present belief position is always the vantage point from which we view all past positions and biographical changes—changes on which we usually do not reflect. On this account, one's biography is how one perceives one's self and society, and "we reconstruct [the past] in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not" (Berger, 1967, p. 56). In a narrative approach, therefore, we speak the "in-time" language that matches professional action with the way professionals conceptualize themselves—also "in time." Professors are able to help students connect who they are with what they do, and to urge their students not to disconnect the two.

Second: Narrative is the mode of the divinely revealed Story.

It is no accident of Christianity that God revealed himself in time. History is basic to our understanding of how God is at work in our world. From the revelation to Abraham in time to the establishment of Israel in time, to the coming of God's Messiah in time, history is the forum of God's action for human beings. Timeless truth characterized Greek culture, but Paul's "now, God..." (Romans 3:21, 5:6) proclaimed the action of the one true God to break the flow of human history in favor of his own plan. It is this dignification of history and thus the dignification of human beings who act within time that Bishop J.E. Lesslie Newbigin underlined. *The Bible is able to interpret human actions.*

Because human history is the forum of God's action for human beings, it stands to reason that the actions of professionals must fit within God's understandings of right action. Professionals' actions must cohere with the divinely revealed Story. If propositional (or, equally, *timeless*) truth is hard to square with imperatives for professional action, a narrative approach that grasps action within its span is a natural way to see imperatives.

Broadly, narrative is helpful for understanding the wider society within which professionals act. Taking a narrative approach links an analyst to the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz and others (Geertz, 1973). (In contrast to animals, human beings are distinguished as meaning-makers, and so their various expressions can be analyzed for intended meanings. Symbolic anthropology sees cultures as available for interpretation. Faithful living requires an understanding of our times, and narrative makes tools available for reading the times.)

Third: A narrative approach to worldview connects to metaphor.

The study of metaphor is recognized widely as a bridge between beliefs and practices. The best known writers on metaphor remain Lakoff and Johnson, with their *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). (They argue that metaphors are much more than mere literary devices, but rather work at pre-conscious levels to shape how people see and act in the world. For example, they point to the way that people view arguments as a form of conflict, indeed, of war. Viewed thus, one loses or wins arguments, is defeated, knocks out opponents, and so on. They ask, what if we were to renew the metaphor to see argumentation as a dance, ending with benefit to both parties. Metaphors are encompassing enough to found political movements. Lakoff notes that liberals and conservatives in politics use different metaphors to frame issues problems and their opponents. Donald

Schön writes of the ways that alternate frames can enable creative practice (1983)). Clearly, metaphor is oriented toward action and is therefore a much more flexible way to analyze professional action. Each of the metaphorically oriented areas of study is a bridge to lived experience. As such, they can underwrite discernment for professional moral action.

Fourth: The narrative approach includes non-Christian students.

In North America, many historically Christian institutions need to find news to articulate faith suitable to their many non-Christian students. Like *faith learning* language, which is closely akin, *worldview* language may fail to make sense to students who, despite making no claims to Christian faith, are present in growing numbers at Christian colleges and universities. A narrative conception of worldview may break through the impasse. A narrative approach allows everyone present to tell their story. It allows each to tell how they came to this point in their life vocationally, ideologically, and so on. We all recognize a commonality in stories that might not surface so easily if we instead try to establish how the other person answers a half-dozen worldview questions. Peter Berger describes the perspective with which some Christians arrive in our classes: "one is what one is, where one is, and cannot even imagine how one could be anything different" (1967, p. 48). When we establish commonality, however, we may gain a basis for conversation with the other person. For most of us, hearing another's story humbles and makes us less certain epistemologically. After all, the teller ended up somewhere else than the hearer. The story thereby reminds us that Christian faith is faith, not certainty. Hearing the story of the other, while it will likely challenge a Christian's perspective, ultimately can enrich. Conversation over such stories may have a similar effect on the non-Christian in our classes who may be enabled—in a non-coercive, conversational atmosphere—to confront his or her own location.

Correlatively with that possibility, a narrative conception could help Christians in such situations to hear what others have to say. Some Christian students may need to improve their skill at articulating faith for the workplace. A narrative approach may bring about greater humility about faith and more love for the other.

Conclusion

Christian higher education surely aims for more than to train professionals for the swelling tide of rationalization. Christian higher education desires to help professionals develop who exercise discernment and who

stand for Christ against the subtle pressures for conformity, who bear the marks of the cross in daily life, who are willing to leave career behind if necessary, who do not merely profess the gospel but who live it as ethically committed professionals.

As important as propositional truth is, today's students demand more. It is not even enough to say that the cognitive must also attend to the affective and behavioral dimensions. Framing identity as cognition-plus is to encourage an add-on mentality. Teachers seek to form professionals for Christ. Narrative is how they live; it is how they are moved and it is how to move them. The educational experience needs to be structured narratively to connect to students and people in general who are moved by story.

The narrative conception makes personal identity to be an active dialogue between cultural ideals and personal experiences and assessments. Narrative makes sense of cultural phenomena. Where philosophical or propositional statements propose truths that are logically true once for all, given similar circumstance, narrative describes the flux and the multifocal nature of our worlds. Worldview now needs to move fully in the direction indicated by its most articulate proponents and to realize its potential for Kingdom good.

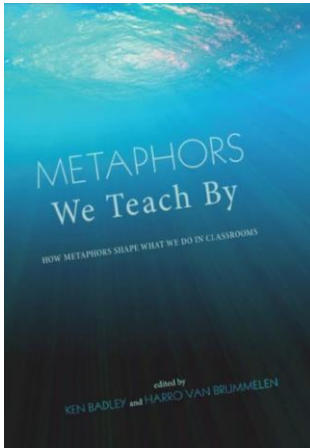
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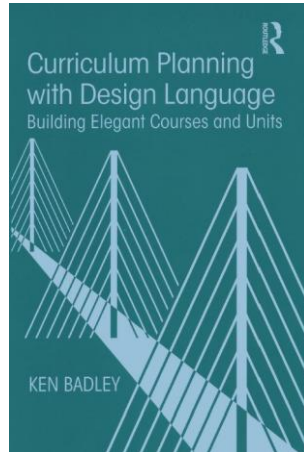
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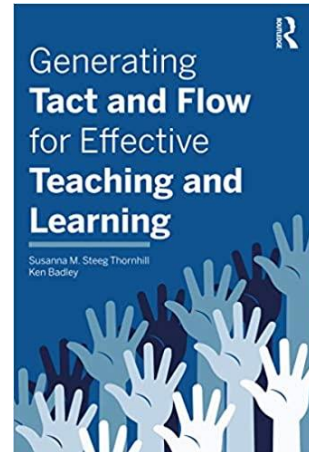
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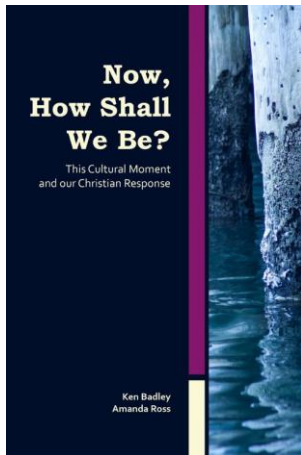
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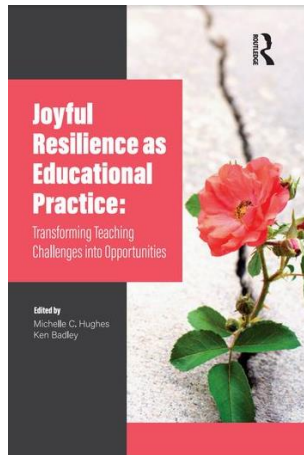
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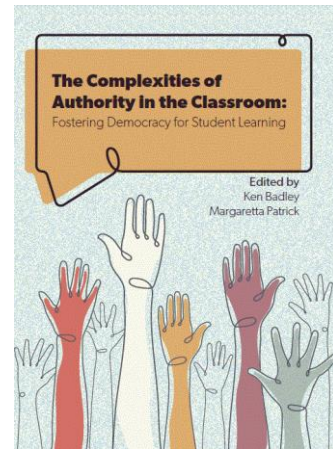
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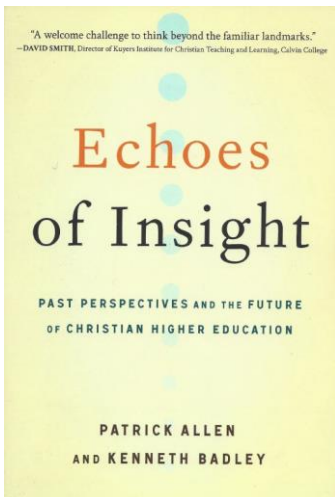


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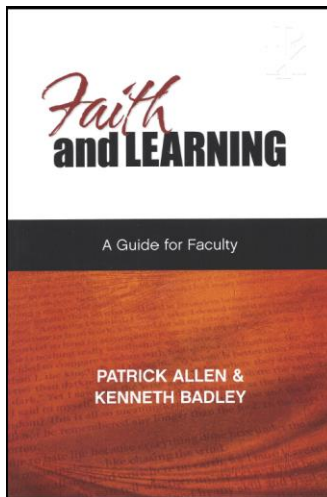


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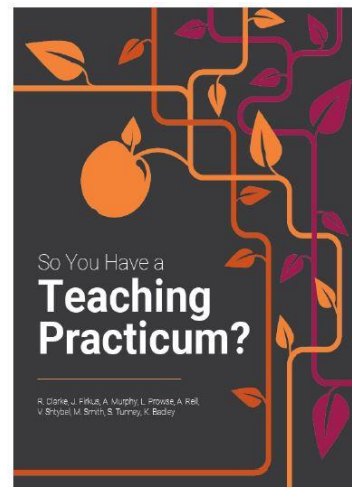


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