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## Vocation As Story, Story As Vocation

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# VOCATION AS STORY, STORY AS VOCATION

BEN BRAZIL

On a frigid December morning in Indiana, a man named Dave Jetmore discovered that his daughter's pet goat had died. Not wanting to upset his little girl—much less broach the topic of death—Jetmore planned to tell his daughter that “Billy” had simply gone to live somewhere pleasant. Inventing *that* story was the easy part; the harder part was hiding the body. First, Jetmore tried to bury the goat, but the ground had frozen hard as rock. Next, he had his son fling the body from the pickup to a snowbank, which failed to conceal anything. Time was growing short. And so, with a frozen goat clattering around the back of the truck, Jetmore began driving through the Indiana countryside, pondering solutions.

Thus begins the first story ever told at Warp & Woof, a community storytelling event in Richmond, Indiana. While Warp & Woof serves the entire community, it grows from the Ministry of Writing Program at the Earlham School of Religion (ESR), which I direct. Does this mean that drinking beer and telling weird stories with strangers counts as ministry? Well, yes. The reasons why reflect the personal and social power of story, which binds and unbinds us, as individuals and communities, to our “common sense” of reality and to our deepest sources of meaning. It matters, too, that you still want to find out what happened to the goat.

Like most creative writing programs, ESR has long approached story as *expression*, training students in creative processes and craft skills that help them surface stories and tell them well. We have paid less attention to how story is also a *tool*. Yet extensive literature in the humanities and social sciences document narrative's power to shape selves and societies, a power that is, in turn, operationalized in politics, marketing, and some forms of therapy and medicine. We speak, for example, of media narratives and political narratives, of racist narratives and anti-racist narratives. All such

phrases depend on a foundational observation: story does work. A new course, Applied Storytelling, proceeds from that insight.

## STORY DOES WORK: THE BASICS

To simplify brutally, stories tell us who we are as individuals and as collectives. On the individual level, narrative psychology and related disciplines tell us that we are, in a fairly literal sense, the stories we tell about ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Since life does not come to us pre-packaged as meaning, but rather as a nonstop firehose of sensory information, we must filter and edit experience to give it shape and sense. Story does precisely that, transforming experience into identity in the process. What experiences made you who you are? How do they fit together? The answer adds up to your identity.

Of course, we cannot author our stories in isolation from the larger nexus of stories that orient our societies. These larger stories bind us—often in ways both good and faithful. Reflecting insights from sociology and from the academic study of myth, Walter Brueggemann, for example, argues that Torah, as story, bound ancient Israel into a religious community by constructing a shared world “of values and symbols, of oughts and may, of requirements and permissions, of power configurations.”<sup>2</sup> Against the illusion that individuals create identities from scratch, Brueggemann argues that the alternative to the “public culture” of Torah was “not private experience, but rather the alternative public experience of Egypt or Canaan or Babylon.”<sup>3</sup> Today, by analogy, rejecting religious stories does not liberate moderns into realms of free, secular self-determination, but rather clears the field for other stories to shape us—those of consumer capitalism, for example.

No escape exists from stories in this sense, which also bind us for ill. According to cognitive linguist George Lakoff, our neural circuitry processes experience via scripts—social, constantly reinforced story frameworks that slot people into standard roles and prescribe courses of action.<sup>4</sup> We have scripts for ordering fast food, but we also have scripts for whiteness and blackness, for femininity and masculinity, for violence and nonviolence. These

scripts dovetail—or compete—with larger stories, or myths, about how the world is and should be. We may embrace or resist these accounts, of course, but story itself is inescapable and neutral. As Wendy Doniger says of myth, narrative is a “gun for hire.”<sup>5</sup>

## APPLICATIONS FOR VOCATION AND MINISTRY

Even as it serves as a tool for ministry, story also provides a distinct perspective on vocation itself. While a narrative approach does not necessarily oppose Parker Palmer’s influential understanding of vocation—as an aspect of the true self we already possess<sup>6</sup>—it does set it in motion. In her work on narrative pastoral care, Karen Scheib suggests that Christians continuously co-author their story-identities with God, who opens new plot possibilities and redemptive ways of interpreting a life’s story arc.<sup>7</sup> From that vantage point, vocation isn’t *discovered* as much as it is *written*, in real time, during an unfolding life of faith.

The same insight can also inform pastoral care. As “story companions,” Scheib argues, ministers and lay people may help others discern where God might be nudging their stories. With more training, narrative therapists and counselors may also help people revise identity-stories that emphasize failure, shame, or tragedy to the exclusion of love, mercy, and redemptive possibility. When loss or despair prematurely forecloses someone’s story of themselves, narrative pastoral care can restore a sense of purpose by suggesting new chapters or story arcs.<sup>8</sup>

Narrative’s social nature also makes it a potent tool for community and justice ministries. For example, Applied Storytelling (and other courses) have borrowed the methodology of Voice of Witness, an organization that seeks to tell the stories of injustice from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. To do so, VOW first interviews people with on-the-ground experience of, for example, solitary confinement or Haitian poverty. Next, they edit the interview transcripts into collections of focused, readable stories, which still take place in the narrators’ own words (narrators

are consulted in this process). In several classes, ESR students have adopted VOW's grassroots methodology. During the pandemic, for example, Applied Storytelling students interviewed elders of The Riverside Church, a famously progressive church in New York City. While the project had mixed results, it taught students interviewing, editing, storycraft, and the joys and struggles of narrating a community's history from the grassroots.

This is serious work. But telling stories is also fun, and fun matters. In part, that's the conviction behind Warp & Woof, the Indiana community storytelling event with which I began (Remember the dead goat?). Four times per year (pre-pandemic), we gathered eight to ten locals to tell short stories around loose themes ("Making It," "Comebacks," etc.). We recruited and coached the most diverse groups of storytellers we could find: from straight, white bankers to black, queer cosmetologists to second-generation Latina high school seniors. We had a lot of fun. But the fun also served a vision embedded in the events' name:

Warp & Woof: The essential foundation or base of any structure or organization; from weaving, in which the warp—the threads that run lengthwise—and the woof—the threads that run across—make up the fabric.<sup>9</sup>

If each story told on our stage is one thread of each storyteller's whole story, then telling those stories together weaves the fabric of community, introducing both performers and listeners to neighbors they didn't know they had. It's fun, and it's ministry.

But storytellers make promises, and not even the word limits of scholarly essays justify breaking them. So let us now return to Dave Jetmore, his son, and Billy, the frozen goat clattering about the back of Jetmore's pickup. As Jetmore drove through the countryside, he came upon a rural church and its illuminated manger scene. It was perfect, Jetmore thought, except that one of the three wise men lacked a camel. In that absence, Jetmore saw a win-win solution. After a few minutes of rearranging, he found himself back in the truck, gazing upon the quiet manger scene, marveling at just how perfectly Billy fit in. "That thing," Jetmore said, "was begging for a goat."

I'm not sure about that. But the people who heard that story together still laugh about it. I believe that's ministry, and a legacy Billy could be proud of.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See, e.g., Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 11.
- 2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 20.
- 3 Ibid. 26.
- 4 George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21<sup>st</sup> Century Politics with an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Brain* (New York: Viking, 2008), 22–28.
- 5 Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 83.
- 6 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
- 7 Karen Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 “Warp and Woof,” Dictionary.com, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/warp-and-woof>.