

A Primer on Storytelling for Communities in Transition

I have served congregations during times of interim and settled ministries, and in both cases, I have told pretty much the same stories. I wonder: Is there ever a time a community is *not* in transition? If it is not in transition, if it is, say, “stuck” somehow or appears to be unchanging, it has been my observation that it’s simply on the edge of transition. Maybe it has pressed the pause button, but the delay does not alter the inevitability of change, the one universal constant. Whether consciously in the midst of transition, or poised to intentionally enter one, every community - as an emotional system - has an ebb and flow, a rhythm to its life.

Stories serve communities, in my opinion, in *all* times and points along the wave. If the interim period of a congregation is typically understood to be a time of emotional turmoil, then there is certainly no tool more appropriate for navigating such times - nor any tool that is more effective, than storytelling.

From the Bible stories I was told in early childhood, to the stories of my parents’ conversions, to the many fictions and fables I would read, hear, and watch over the years, I have understood myself, my world, and the phenomenon of being alive through storied language, through images remembered from stories, whether I wanted to or not. And at times, I would change, challenge, or retell those stories, maybe from a different perspective this time, as I changed and either saw them differently, or understood more with maturity.

Needless to say, I have great respect for the power of stories, and I have no qualms whatsoever about telling them for adults as much as I would for children, because, quite frankly, sometimes adults need them more. Stories themselves then also directly engage faith, especially folktales, because they often feature characters who make choices and take actions, whether from determination or desperation, that they hope will lead to a particular result. The result may not be the one they expected, but in most cases, it is the result that is *needed*, as the listener and teller are likely to perceive it.

The most powerful experience of faith, of course, comes from the surprise: The suspension of disbelief that allows the resolution to be freshly satisfying, the twist or layered understanding that the listener experiences this time that is different from that other time, or other past stories, the special nuance, whatever it is, that makes this present, liminal experience unique and unlike any other that has occurred before, or will ever occur after.

Preparing to Tell Stories.

Over the years, I have developed my own process for telling stories. It is, at least to me, a very simple one, and yet I am often told that people are amazed by my ability to tell a story from memory, and even insist that they themselves could never do it! Of course I don't believe that. I think everyone has their own process, and there are excellent resources out there. I will share these resources at the end. But perhaps my process will be helpful for others learning to tell stories from memory. The process of

the steps I use do not necessarily fall in a particular order; often they happen simultaneously or overlap.

The Structural Skeleton

The key to memorizing a story, at least for me, is to be able to record the simplest outline of plot and elements. This follows storytelling tradition from ancient times, when people remembered entire epics and genealogies of their culture. One of the benefits of cultural tales is that this method is embedded in the structure of the story itself through repetitions, such as events occurring in threes, a common device.

I do not try to remember a story from beginning to end. Instead, I first memorize it as a whole, a chunk with the beginning, repetitions, and end, and that's *it*. The details and nuances, such as figurative language or the characters' emotions and inner monologues, come spontaneously when I tell the story out loud.

So my skeletal structure for, say, a story like Jack and the Beanstalk might look or sound something like this:

- Cow for beans.
- Mother throws beans.
- Jack finds beanstalk, climbs up.
- Giant's wife - Hiding.
 - ~ Golden harp.
 - ~ Goose.
 - ~ Chased down.
- Cuts the beanstalk.
- Mother and son rich.

I may write out this skeleton, or I may just try to recall and repeat it to see if I can.

There have been times I have actually written one-word item lists on my hand, because there were many elements that would be easy to forget!

(I have had to do this, for example, with the Celtic story from the Mabinogion, where Arthur's knights encounter 5 important power animals. Because they don't have the same cultural significance to me, I know I will need help remembering them.)

Multiple Versions & Primary Sources

This is why I like to read multiple versions of stories, and especially to read them in primary resources, or as close as I can get. Many stories that storytellers will find are in children's books, where they have been told in a literary manner - meant to be read, not heard - with details and nuances in beautiful but complex language by the author.

The more descriptions and details there are, the more personal they are to the other author and less so to me, and therefore the harder the story will be to commit to memory. So I prefer to read the simplest versions I can find, *in addition* to these literary versions that may exist, or may tease out themes for me to reflect upon as I develop my own telling.

Common Elements.

Additionally, I get to compare common elements across different versions, and find some that are used in one version, but left out of another. This repetition of elements helps enormously with memorization (especially where they are visual elements like

objects or people), and it also provides more variety of choices to think about what elements I want to include in my version.

Cultural research will also reveal significance behind details that at first may appear arbitrary; the number of times a linden or rowan tree are referenced in European fairy tales has to do with the cultural understanding of the spiritual, magical significance of those specific trees. Understanding those cultural references will enrich the telling as they engage the teller in the process of discovery.

Avoid Cultural Misappropriation. But the other reason it is important to read multiple versions and original source material is to avoid cultural misappropriation. Even the story of Mussa and Nagib*, which clearly has Middle Eastern names, fails to mention a reference to Allah found in earlier versions. Whether or not the teller chooses to mention Allah, what are the implications of leaving out this cultural detail, when presenting this spiritual wisdom tale to a Western audience? What, on the other hand, would be the implications of telling a story that references a religion often maligned in our culture, and with which many of us are much less familiar than others? These kinds of things are important for a storyteller's personal integrity and faithfulness to the spirit of the story, as much as from a social justice standpoint.

In Conclusion

I've hopefully shown how valuable personal reflection is in making a story your own. That is the key, in my opinion, to telling authentically. It is better to tell

a story from a genuine place of interest, wonder, and inspiration, than to try to tell it word for word the way someone else has. Reading multiple versions and doing research will naturally lead to personal reflection. And that's the fun part of the process, anyway!

Narrative markers (such as wording the repeated elements the same way) and figurative language are also important and helpful tools for making the storytelling event effective and authentic. Storyteller and coach Doug Lipman talks about centering the story around the image that stands out to you most...starting there as a place for inspiration and around which to develop your telling of the story.

Powerful imagery is important for memorizing, but also for your listeners. If your story is written with abstract words and language, or complicated description, make sure to change out that language for language that evokes an image.

Listening to a person tell a story requires much more of this than reading one; people have to remember different characters, and they are more likely to remember them by a characteristic, then by simply hearing the names over and over again. The “stooped, old elder with his crooked cane” is instantly more memorable than “the older man.”

**Story can be found on the UUA website:*

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/tales/session5/123298.shtml>