

# Rethinking the Role of Narrative in Mission Training

by Tom Steffen of Biola University (Fall, 1997)

During the Christmas break I viewed the video "A Time to Kill." Well written, filmed and acted, I found myself quickly jotting down notes after its dramatic conclusion. A white jury in Mississippi made headlines through the acquittal of a black father for the murder of two white males who had raped, beaten, thrown off a 30 foot bridge and left to die his ten year old daughter. Committed in the public courthouse of a small town before numerous witnesses, the double murder seemed an open and closed case for the politically ambitious, veteran D.A.

But the young aspiring white attorney, challenged by his black client to think like a white jury, won an acquittal on the basis of insanity. How did this happen in spite of radical racism and all the indisputable facts? During the summation, rather than rely on lawyer wizardry to manipulate the facts, the lawyer asked the jury to close their eyes and visualize what happened to a 10 year-old black girl robbed of her innocence and the possibility of ever becoming a mother. In graphic detail he walked the jury through the gruesome ordeal. I, like the jury, heard the clothes being ripped off and the unanswered screams, felt the gripping terror, sensed the pain, powerlessness, and hopelessness, smelled the foul alcohol on the breath of the perpetrators. His final comment to the jury: "Now visualize the 10 year-old as a white girl."

This video has some strong implications for mission professors and trainers. In this brief article I would like to focus on one--the power of narrative to forge opinions. I believe if we are to be successful in training a new (and old) generation of effective missionaries, we must learn, among other things, to become effective storytellers, capable of clothing abstract concepts in concrete characters and objects.

As mission professors and trainers we often like to play with ideas. Much like an image on a computer screen, we like to roll the ideas from side to side and from top to bottom to examine all the multiple nuances, and then convey them to our students. Our deep passion for abstract ideas is often caught by eager students (regardless of their pedagogical preferences), and repeated around the world. But should this be the case? Has our bias for the abstract communicated in logical sequence (to us), and perpetuated by zealous disciples actually hindered the grasp and geographical spread of the Gospel?

In *The Future of Capitalism*, Lester Thurow (1996) argues that electronic media, not the family, Church or social institutions, has the greatest influence on the formation of values today. Claims Thurow: "What counts is the emotive visual appeal to feelings or fears and not the logical appeal to abstract rigorous thought" (p.83). This certainly was the case in "A Time to Kill." Cold facts stressed by the articulate D.A. were not all lost in the summation of the defendant's lawyer, rather they were refocused to emphasize the human pain resulting from the heated reality of past and present racial animosity. Should not our training give equal attention to the emotional human aspect of abstract ideas and cold facts?

At this point I can hear some readers argue that what the writer claims as one of the strengths of narrative, emotions often conveyed disjointedly through story, is its obvious weakness. Facts get lost in emotions. Missions, not to mention Christianity, built on such subjective emotions will never survive the test of time. My answer to such critics is that they are half correct. Missions is much more than facts and figures; it is first and foremost people, from which the *latter* originate. Christianity is much more than doctrines and theologies; it is first and foremost a Person, from which the latter originate.

Several years ago I listened to a seminary systematic theologian bemoan the fact that systematic theology left so many students uninspired. The abstract concepts presented in logical sequence (to him) failed to impress many students. The professor asked the class, "Isn't there some way these abstract concepts can be wrapped in the reality of life?" While I'm not sure the professor recognized systematic theology finds its origin in the storybook nature of Scripture, he did recognize the need to connect the abstract with the concrete.

God in his infinite wisdom chose to convey his timeless message (facts and emotions) through the foundation of narrative, the predominant literary genre of Scripture (Steffen). The storyline (Jesus Christ) of the sacred Storybook wraps human form to abstract facts and ideas. For example, Paul, in Romans 4, didn't just talk about justification by faith; he talks first about Abraham so as to make the abstract theological concept come alive. If God connected human characters to abstract concepts, we must learn to reconnect the same in mission training. Should we do so, we may be surprised at what "facts" get caught and conveyed to others as with the Mississippi jury.

### **References Cited**

Steffen, Tom A. (1996) *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*. La Habra, CA: Center for Organizational and Ministry Development.

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