

Digital Biblical Storytelling: Calling or Contradiction? by Tom Boomersshine, Sr.

The need to make the stories of God a media experience became clear to me when I was a pastor working with teenagers in East Harlem and on the west side of Chicago. In their culture, the kind of biblical scholarship that I was learning in seminary was meaningless. To put it bluntly, they couldn't have cared less about JEDP and redaction criticism! They needed to experience the stories of God in a way that would connect with their culture. The stories needed images and music. And the youth needed a way to interact with them that would connect with their own life stories.

So I wrote several plays—an East Harlem passion play, a Christmas pageant called “Amen,” a review called “East Harlem Swings”—and explored being a religious dramatist. Always in the back of my mind was the hope that we would find a way to make the stories meaningful on TV. But the more I learned about storytelling, the more it became clear that storytelling, not drama, was the original and generative medium of biblical narrative. It was the spring from which the stories in electronic media would flow. Ever since that experience, I have been working on telling the stories in oral and electronic media.

Why should biblical storytellers jump on the bandwagon of digital media in a post-literate culture? The task of biblical storytellers is to tell the stories in a manner that is indigenous to every human culture. Indigenous here means using the communication system of the culture. In oral culture, indigenous meant telling the stories. In manuscript culture, it meant reading the stories from the manuscript; in print culture it meant reading the stories from a book to your family; in document culture it meant making sense of the documents as history and theology. And in digital culture, indigenous means making the stories a vivid experience both orally and digitally.

Another principle: new communication systems resynthesize rather than eliminate earlier communication systems. Oral communication has always continued in the various eras of the dominant system of literacy. But its role and character has changed as part of a new synthesis in each new culture. We, as storytellers, need to discover the indigenous ways of doing biblical storytelling in the new synthesis of post-literate, digital culture.

Lots of people think that the task of biblical storytellers is to resist the intrusion of electronic media into our lives. The invasion of TV, computers, radio and rock music has eliminated family time; time spent sitting in groups and sharing stories with each other. In this view, biblical storytelling is a way of fighting the corrosive effects of digital media. Biblical storytelling is a way of going back to an earlier, more pristine culture where people still told stories to each other.

But this is a misunderstanding of what is happening. The rediscovery of biblical storytelling has happened in the context of the emergence of electronic, now digital, culture. In the U.S. this rebirth began in the late 60's and early 70's in the immediate

aftermath of the coming to adulthood of the first generation that grew up with TV. It was only in the context of the need for a vital, compelling experience of biblical narrative by the children of the TV generation that biblical storytelling met a felt need. The rediscovery of biblical storytelling is congruent with the development of the new cultural styles and ways of knowing that emerge with electronic, now digital, culture. In other words, if radio, TV, and computers hadn't happened, we'd still be perfectly happy with reading documents in monotone and thinking that reading the text in silence is the best way to experience biblical stories. Contemporary biblical storytelling and the Network of Biblical Storytellers are children of digital culture.

Why does biblical storytelling make sense as a part of the new synthesis of digital culture? I'll name two reasons: the centrality of sound and the vivid experience as a criterion of meaning.

With the emergence of electronic sound (radio, stereo, and TV) electronic media have made the vibes and rhythms of sound a primary criterion of meaning. Father Walter Ong, the greatest scholar of the interaction of media, culture, and religion, calls electronic culture a "secondary oral culture" for this reason. Electronic culture has many of the characteristics of oral culture. For example, communities in digital culture are formed around a particular band or a particular beat. The "Deadheads" of the Grateful Dead are a global community. For people who care about God and the stories of God's actions in the Bible, they want to hear the sounds of the stories. And when the people of digital culture hear the stories and feel their impact they are amazed. The question is "How does it sound?" not "What's the evidence?"

Second, what matters in digital culture is compelling experience. A rock concert or a really great movie doesn't just tell you about something; you're there, in the middle of it, and it happens to you. High literate culture demands psychological distance and standing back from experience in order to think about it. Biblical storytelling is a way of making the distant experience of looking at a biblical text something vivid, alive, and present. You can experience it.

If biblical storytelling is an integral part of the new synthesis that is happening in digital culture, it's important for biblical storytelling to be oriented as fully as possible to that culture. The primary goal isn't to go back to an earlier culture and re-capitulate some pristine experience that is finally a fantasy. We don't live in an oral culture and we don't want to live in an oral culture. The romance of oral culture is a myth. Oral culture was characterized by perpetual tribal warfare, subsistence living, primitive housing and transportation, and the submission of women to male hunters and warriors. There were a lot of good things about oral culture, and we have a lot to learn from it but it was not the ideal human condition. It will never be possible for us as a human community to re-enter oral culture.

The task of biblical storytellers is to find ways to make biblical stories fully present in digital culture. Or, as Dennis Dewey has said, "The stories are alive. Our job is not to kill them." God's purpose is to get the stories of God's deeds in the history of Israel and in

Jesus Christ told now in this digital culture. The task of biblical storytellers is to cooperate with that divine energy in enabling people to experience those stories authentically now.

If that's the case, what are the ways in which biblical stories can be told in digital culture? There are three primary languages in digital culture: images, music, and story. We need to explore the intersection of these three languages in the telling of biblical stories.

The most difficult of these explorations is the integration of stories with images. As we all experience every day, images are foundational in digital culture. TV, movies, computers, and Web sites are all ways of telling stories with images. Amelia and I were in a computer store the first of this week. A new MAC was playing "A.I." on a thin wide-screen computer monitor and there was a group gathered around watching these beautiful, compelling images. The stories that are put on screens are the stories that people learn and remember and want to watch again. So we need to explore the full range of ways of telling biblical stories with images.

The other intersection is with music. Biblical stories were originally sung and, until the Reformation, the stories were chanted when they were read from the manuscripts. That is still the case in most synagogues and Eastern Orthodox churches. We, as biblical storytellers, need to explore the rediscovery of that happy relationship between storytelling and music. Background music like Angela and the Northumbria Community musicians played at the 2000 Festival Gathering, jazz, and rock are all possible approaches. But we need to work on it.

We have only begun this exploration. With the development of digital graphics programs, midis, and video editing on home computers, we can all now explore biblical storytelling with images and music; so also can the highly creative young people in our churches. Once we get the basic elements in place, there will be a rainbow of richly textured and varied tellings of biblical stories in digital culture. Digital culture is home plate for biblical storytellers. It is where we started and it is where we will end up, scoring the winning run for the team of the Holy One.

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