

CHAPTER FOUR

Narrative Now

Narratives . . . give a coherence to human lives.¹

SO FAR WE HAVE sketched in some detail the loss of sin and guilt, and the subsequent rise of the sinless society with its deep-seated issue of chronic shame and its social and relational consequences. In doing this, however, much has been made of the importance of narrative and story in the shaping of the self. Indeed, there has been an assumption that the reader would, for the present moment at least, buy-in to the rather bold claims being made about story to allow the discussion to focus more readily on sin and shame. However, given that much more will be made of the importance of story in shaping the self (especially as we move towards a rereading of the narratives that surround the life and death of Jesus), we will take an excursion at this stage to consider at some length the centrality of narrative for expressing and understanding who we are as human beings.

Though our discussion has taken us into the realm of chronic shame, this is merely a specific example of a more general sense of meaningless, emptiness, and alienation felt by many in our modern societies. While it is true that we only have one life to live, life expectancy is expanding with each generation. Quality of life is also improving, both medically and materially. As such, thought of the afterlife gets pushed further and further from our minds. We are far more concerned with this life than with our fate in the next—and that is where story comes in.

Narrative, or the desire to tell stories about the world and ourselves, is the mode by which people try to make sense of the one life they have. People look to stories for a quality of sufficiency, an explanation of the joys and the ills that life brings. That is why, as we have said, if we desire the

1. Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 107.

people to hear our stories of atonement, and employ them as narratives of salvation, then they must be stories that are meaningful and sufficient. However, while narratives do give coherence to the self (or, to put it more forcefully: to be a person is to have narrative coherence), to speak in this way only adds weight to the argument. That is, while narrative (or self-)coherence may be desired, many people live, or merely exist, with a narrative incoherence—a breakdown in the story they are able to tell, which results in a disruption of self.

Given this contemporary dilemma, we shall go on to discuss the role narrative plays in an increasingly therapeutic society before considering how the Christian community might similarly and judiciously appropriate narrative when speaking meaningfully and sufficiently about the atonement. For the moment, however, our attention will remain with a more general look at narrative and its increasing significance in shaping self and society.

The Pervasiveness of Narratives

It is almost universally accepted that human beings are storytellers. Anthropology, sociology, and, more recently, psychotherapy are drawn to the fact that, without exception, all peoples—past and present—have made sense of the world through story. That said, story remains for many an uncertain and dubious way of expressing knowledge. It is part of an epistemology that is given over to fiction, myth, and primitive ways of understanding and describing the world. Its role in speaking about certainties, in stating truth and fact is, to say the least, unclear.

Post-Enlightenment, the ability of the self to reason—to name the world and its contents in an assured manner—suppressed the claims of myth and story as a way of knowing, relegating them to mere fictions in a world of certainties. Naturally, this had huge implications for religious traditions that had communicated for so long through myth and parable, narrative and allegory. By the time we reached the twentieth century, modernity's grip upon Western society was as strong as the West's imperial, colonial, and industrial-grip on the rest of the developing world. The industrialized, post-Enlightenment self stood at the apex of evolution, placed there by a scientific worldview that spoke the language of reason, rationality, and logic.

Unsurprisingly, fearful of the hubristic claims of modern scientific man and the debunking of religious epistemologies, the church responded in kind, developing logical apologetics and scientific hermeneutical methodologies. The “truth” and “fact” of the Christian faith became the basis of mission and evangelism in this emerging context. The biblical story was largely sidelined. Of greater concern was historical authenticity, for such facts were thought to be far more persuasive for the modern, rational mind than talk of myth and metaphor.

This is not by way of criticism, however. Though some may find it hard to accept, the church has always been as influenced by the cultural and philosophical context in which it has found itself as it has by any commitment to the Scriptures. Indeed, it could be suggested that to be in the world, culturally and philosophically, could be positively beneficial to its missional work, rather than detrimental. However, problems certainly arise during stark periods of transition if we allow cultural and philosophical expression to accelerate away from us. For this is when the relevance and meaningfulness of our message stretch to breaking point. This is when the language we use to communicate becomes unintelligible and incredulous to our cultural and philosophical contemporaries. This is a very real danger currently facing the church as we journey deeper into the twenty-first century.

The dominant grip that modernity had on our cultural and philosophical thinking has finally begun to weaken. The West has become post-imperial, post-colonial, post-industrial—post-modern. And the self, who slips through the ever-widening fingers of modernity, falls into a world of uncertainty where truth and untruth, fact and fiction, history and myth are one and the same thing. In this world, you are only human if you have a story to tell and a storied world in which to live. Indeed, narrative is no longer something that is imposed upon the world and the self, but the self and the world are narrative in their very existence. “We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.”²

Far from being peripheral in our perception of self and the world, story is now seen very much as a pervasive, necessary, and constructive epistemological category. The academy (and that includes the scientific community) is waking up to this reality, and it is to an increasing degree using narrative in its work. The assured world of reason is slowly but surely being transferred to the realm of myth, which, in turn, has been raised from

2. Hardy, *Towards a Poetics of Fiction*, 5. Cited in, MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 211.

a place of derision by epistemologists to a necessary tool in understanding what it is to be human. The issue is no longer whether something is mere fact, but whether we can any longer speak of something as being mere story. For even the most simple story is entrenched in a complex network of interrelated parts. With our eyes wide open to the role story plays in making us human, “[even] the most familiar, most primitive, most ancient and seemingly straightforward of stories reveal depths that we might hitherto have failed to anticipate.”³

Such fresh insights have made it clear that to speak of story in purely fictional terms does an injustice to it as a medium for speaking about, understanding, and shaping the world in which we live. We have sufficiently recognized the complexities and centrality of story and myth such that we can no longer allow them to be sidelined, “even for a culture as fragmented, sophisticated, and anti-traditional as ours.”⁴

Narrative and the Self

When a human being narrates the self, that individual is not imposing his will upon reality, and shaping it in a fictitious manner. Rather, he is simply augmenting a world that is itself narrative. The narrative self has been preempted. “Life is always-already narrative, in advance of our narration.”⁵ The idea of *quod erat demonstrandum* given to us by the Enlightenment, finds itself merely a supplement to more experiential realities. We are no longer convinced simply by our ability to demonstrate that something is so; the more important epistemology is for reality to be lived as if it were so.

What the self has come to believe is that formulaic, rational cognition makes for poor language when describing the complexities of human action and interaction. Narrative is far better suited to a way of knowing and interpreting the day-to-day experiences of life that we need to make meaningful. It is like a thread that holds together what can be at times the rather disparate parts of our lives, weaving them into the story of who we are. Therefore, story should never be seen as an irrelevant or neutral phenomenon, as some primitive way of knowing that has been outmoded by

3. Cobley, *Narrative*, 2.

4. Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?* 69.

5. Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story*, 142.

rational epistemologies. Indeed, story is for the self a most powerful present- and future-shaping reality.

Despite the fact that story appears to be based around questionable, experiential ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us, such as intuition and emotion, the self prefers to trust these inner ways of knowing over and above the public “truths” given by archaic institutions. For many, intuitive and emotional ways of knowing are far more important than logic in giving account of truth. Briefly put, we prefer a good story to a good fact. Even the eminent scientist E. O. Wilson has recognized that “No matter . . . how beautifully *theory* falls out to however many decimal places, all our experience is still processed by the sensory and nervous systems . . . and all of knowledge is still evaluated by our idiosyncratically evolved emotions.”⁶

Of course, context plays a large part in the formation of emotional and intuitive ways of knowing. It would be very naïve indeed to ignore this stark fact. Context contributes to interpretation, and meaning. Our personal story is influenced by the collective narratives of the communities in which we live. Indeed, the factors of gender, class, race, and sexual preference are powerful contributors to the story we tell. Nevertheless, none of this detracts from the reality that, regardless of how it is formed or what influences shape it, we must engage with the personal story of the self.

What is not being suggested here is that rational, logical epistemologies are a complete irrelevance. Indeed, despite academic agreement about the pervasiveness of narrative among human beings, no one is keen to make narrative the unique or the prime way of knowing and expressing knowledge. Even narrative thinkers, while favoring story as a significant approach to reality, recognize that human expression and interpretation are not limited to storytelling. We are more than capable of organizing and recollecting life in non-narrative form. However, the fact that narrative is so pervasive must surely silence criticism, which suggests that the current attention given to story, and its significance for speaking about reality, is disproportionate to other epistemologies. Its commonness alone demands that it be taken seriously.

However, notwithstanding its newfound attention, the very pervasiveness that gives significance to story is also one of its weaknesses, for the complexity and diversity of narrative forms have meant that, “despite their agreement on the importance of the category, there is yet to emerge

6. Wilson, “Wings across Two Cultures,” 4.

a consensus among narrative thinkers concerning precisely what the term narrative means.”⁷ Such an issue could easily lead to digression in this discussion. So to simplify matters, and to use narrative in a clear and productive way, we will refer to it with the presupposition that narrative is “an account of characters and events in a plot moving over time and space through conflict towards resolution.”⁸ These most basic elements are often referred to as the grammar of a story, without which it ceases to be a story. As Stephen Sykes states, “Story is only a story if it possess a setting, a theme, a plot, and a resolution; it is memorable only if it conforms to this natural sequence.”⁹

Story also draws on the grammar of symbol and metaphor. These decorate the plot, drawing readers deeper into the storied world and helping them to make sense of it. Metaphor and symbol are appealing to the human senses—they attract. As Becker notes, a human being “is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter.”¹⁰ Through the grammar of symbol and metaphor, story is able to speak the language of, and be understood by, the human psyche.

The Problem with Metanarratives

So far, rather far-reaching claims about the role of narrative in the construction of the self have been made. Along with Payne, it appears reasonable to argue that “stories or narratives form the matrix of concepts and beliefs by which we understand our lives, and the world in which our lives take place.”¹¹ The question often raised, however, is whether the metanarrative (and that includes those of religious purpose) can ever be used meaningfully when set against the typically isolated, localized, personalized, and pluralistic narratives of those who live in current Western society? After all, it should be self-evident that our lives are multi-storied rather than the product of a single, all-encompassing drama. Indeed, given that there are so many stories, and that we can interpret similar events in different ways, the claim that no single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction, nor

7. Grenz and Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 277.

8. Fackre, “Narrative Theology,” 341.

9. Sykes, “Story and Eucharist,” 366.

10. Becker, *Denial*, 3.

11. Payne, *Narrative Therapy*, 20.

encapsulate or handle all contingencies of life, appears to be a reasonable assumption. Given these observations, it is easy to understand the recent derision of the metanarrative.

Perhaps the first thing to point out is that while we may not live comfortably with the idea of the metanarrative, we are not ignorant of them nor, to greater or lesser degree, are we able to remove ourselves from their influence. Quite simply, we are storytellers, “living among the ruins of . . . former grand narratives . . . [making] stories out of the rubble of the old narratives [we] find lying around.”¹² While we may be obsessed with our own little stories, this cannot detract from the reality that we inhabit a world where our little stories are simply part of a larger narrative. Our lives are nothing more than the search for self-understanding, and if we are to understand ourselves fully, then we cannot escape the metanarrative entirely. Indeed, despite postmodernity’s infamous incredulity towards the metanarrative, those who would argue that we live in a postmodern age must face up to the fact that in reality this claim is itself simply a “grand narrative, announcing the death of another grand narrative in its rearview mirror.”¹³

Even if this suspicion of the metanarrative remains, it does not mean that the Christian story has to keep silent. It can and has been argued that Christianity is as much a complex drama of little stories as it is a metanarrative that should be embraced in its entirety. For instance, Brueggemann has noted that, “as the Bible does not consist in a single large drama, but in many small, disordered dramas, so our lives are not lived in a single, large, unified drama. In fact, we are party to many little dramas.”¹⁴ Life is a story consisting of a number of chapters that are related only by the fact that they are lived out by one person. Therefore, in order to prove meaningful and sufficient, the task of the Christian narrative would not be “a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations.”¹⁵

Brueggemann certainly gives food for thought with his observations. However, there is an underlying dilemma that he does not address. For while he recognizes our chameleon-like ability to “sensitively [adjust] the ‘presentation of self’ in relation to whatever is demanded of a particular

12. Loughlin, *Telling*, 9.

13. Jensen, *The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*, 11.

14. Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 70.

15. Brueggemann, *Imagination*, 20.

situation,”¹⁶ his observation does not deal with the desire for a narrative coherence of the self. Rather, it only serves to perpetuate our fragmented, traumatic, and ultimately meaningless state. If left unattended, as we have been at pains to point out, such incoherence ultimately leads us into the depths of chronic shame. That said, without blurring the issue to utter abstraction, this is not to argue that one needs a single coherent story—only that the self is able to deal coherently with the multivocality with which he or she may choose (or be forced) to narrate the self. An inability to deal with this is precisely the inadequacy we observe in the chronically shamed between the ideal self and real self.

This Is My Story, Now Tell Me Yours

Once upon a time . . . humankind understood everything through stories. Unlike the “How?” that drove the philosophical and scientific pursuits of the Enlightenment, stories were employed to help satisfy the “Why?” of human curiosity. “The answers they gave did not have to be literally true; they only had to satisfy people’s curiosity by providing an answer, less for the mind than for the soul. For the soul they were true, but probably no one bothered to ask whether that truth was factual or ‘merely’ metaphorical.”¹⁷ With the emergence of our search for the self, we have come full circle. No longer convinced by the rational icons of modernity, the self is instead looking to story “avidly for illumination of [their] homelessness in time and circumstance.”¹⁸

Though many are comfortable living this way, there will be for some (perhaps many in the church) a question that rings in the void that is perceived to exist between the objective certainties of truth and the more subjective, relativistic understanding that story is believed to give. Unfortunately, there is no reassurance that can be given to those who desire to make statements of fact derived from a particular metanarrative. There is “truth” for the self: “this is my truth; now tell me yours.” Relativism reigns. The self approaches religious and theological metanarratives with extreme caution. There is a vacuum of meaning at the heart of our communities. However, we increasingly live in an age when we have begun to liberate stories “from the tyranny of having to be legitimized by a metanarrative

16. Giddens, *Modernity*, 190.

17. Parry and Doan, *Story Re-Visions*, 1.

18. Wilder, “Story and Story-World,” 362.

before they can be taken seriously.”¹⁹ All stories have equal and potential worth, bringing meaning and illumination to the life being lived. Therefore, our own story, told through our own words and experiences does not have to plead its case before all other narratives, since this is our truth. A story is, therefore, legitimized by its usefulness—or, to speak negatively, a story is de-legitimized if it proves meaningless to us. The only way to legitimately question this storied reality, relative as it may seem, is to offer an alternative story: “This is my story, now tell me yours.”

We live in a sea of stories. Being consumers we will try on for size any story we encounter that might prove meaningful and sufficient for us. In this sense, we are all open to stories that may have been previously associated with the truth claims of the metanarratives of religious traditions, but only if we encounter them as stories, and not merely as statements of fact. It is of paramount importance, therefore, that as a church we let our story be a story, and not a mere fact. For facts are soulless, lacking the relational dynamic that gives personal, appropriate, and sufficient meaning to the “Why?” of life. Therefore, if we believe that our story is the most meaningful and sufficient one that can be encountered, it will be revealed as the truth without us having to state it as such.

19. Parry and Doan, *Story*, 5.