

How I Became the World's Only Full Time Professional Biblical Storyteller
By Dennis Dewey

The old man approached me slowly, shifted his cane to his left hand and extended his right to me. He shook my hand with an earnest grip too young for his years. His eyes brimming with tears, he spoke in a quiet but firm voice, "I've been going to church all my life, but I never heard the gospel till tonight!" At moments like this, I know WHY I do what I do. What I had just done that evening was to perform the stories of John's Gospel nearly verbatim from the scripture text.

I am a biblical storyteller. I tell the stories of the scriptures in the words in which they have been traditioned to us in a way that give expression to their liveliness, much as a virtuoso gives faithful, passionate expression to the notes of a score. When audiences tell me that I make the stories come alive, I remind them, "The stories already ARE alive; I just try not to KILL them!" Gratifying responses are not infrequent from my audiences; they inspire and humble me. And I have come to stand in awe of the power that these ancient stories have to move people, to change lives, and to challenge the powers.

When I feel long-winded, I describe myself as "a professional, itinerant, ecumenical minister of biblical story." This ministry, in addition to performance, entails leading workshops and retreats in which I help others discover their storytelling gifts and encounter biblical story not as "text out there," but as living reality experienced from the inside-out. Having explained the nature of my work, I usually hear next the question, "And you make a living at this?" By the grace of God, yes, not only do I make a living at it, but my work has grown year by year. Now in my seventh year at this vocation, I have finally discovered that this is what I wanted to do when I grew up!

I began doing biblical storytelling my first year in the parish. And I had no idea that it would change my life. At that time, moreover, I did not yet call it "storytelling" but "drama." The important distinction in nomenclature would come later in the evolution of my craft. On Palm Sunday I performed for the first time the passion narrative from the Gospel of Mark in lieu of a sermon. The response was electric! People were moved to tears. Many told me that they had never experienced anything like this before, that I had a real gift, that I should do more of this. So in 1980 I signed up for continuing education event with Tom Boomershine, professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio and founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers.

Tom helped me understand the overwhelming response I had experienced in telling Mark's passion story. He reminded me that the stories that became Bible (a word that means "books") were first experienced and remembered as breath and sound and noise---amusing, compelling, moving stories in which people met God. Only later were the stories downloaded to paper, eventually to be regarded more as "ideas" frozen in silent ink than as lively adventures in communal imagination. Tom gave me the terminology "storytelling" to designate more accurately what I had previously referred to as dramatic monologue." I came to understand that storytelling, unlike theater, is immediate and direct. The storyteller engages the audiences eye-to-eye with no "suspension of disbelief" as in theater. After Tom spellbound me by telling the whole Gospel of Mark, I was hooked! I knew I had to do this, too; I had to commit the gospel to memory and perform it as story. My college theater background and the ham in my genes helped. I thought I could be pretty good at it. And over the years I got better.

Invitations came from other churches to perform. Word spread. Ranging farther and farther from home, I added the Gospel of John to my repertoire. And I began to realize that, in the best of all possible worlds, I would be a full time storyteller and teacher of storytelling. But, of course, this is the REAL world. Sure, Jesus was an itinerant storyteller, but he didn't have a family to feed!

The vocation to biblical storytelling began to emerge during a rigorous career counseling process. I underwent this counseling in the fourth year of a difficult and painful pastorate. My call to parish ministry was seriously in doubt. From the first day on the job at this, my third church, it was clear to me that my style, personality and ideas would meet strong resistance from some. But I was not prepared for the intensity of the animosity, and my defensiveness quickly made a bad situation worse.

I thought that "hanging in" was the answer, that in time, when people got to know me, they would find that I was a right sort and a pretty good pastor, too. But the pain of the conflict reached such a crescendo in my fifth year that a caring colleague advised me, "You don't need to die for the church, you know; it's already been done."

That prophetic word lifted the weight. I knew then that I had to resign my pastorate, but I also knew that I could not accept a call to church right away, even though the counseling process had confirmed that I was, indeed, suited for parish ministry---just not in this particular church. I felt too beaten up to inflict myself on another congregation. Then I remembered what had risen to the top in the career counseling: biblical storytelling. "Right," I had thought at the time. "They warned me that this process would help identify the 'horses that pull my cart,' but that practical concerns would also have to be taken into consideration before any decision was made.

I called Tom Boomershine, who had introduced me to biblical storytelling a decade earlier. He invited me to come to Dayton and to spend a day with him, exploring this vocation. I made the 12-hour pilgrimage to the Mecca of biblical storytelling on a sweltering spring day in an old beat up VW with no air conditioning. The heat added to the intensity of the experience. Tom spent time with me, patiently listening, suggesting, encouraging. He blessed me and affirmed my call, and invited me to learn from him how to lead a workshop and retreat.

I was under no illusion that I would actually be able to support my family in this most specialized of ministries. But my sense of vocation to biblical storytelling was too strong not to answer. My presbytery validated my calling, offered me the support of prayer, but left to me the minor details of the entrepreneurship: finding work and being compensated for it. Imagining that my "career" would probably last a couple years, subsidized by my good wife's income, I surmised that when I "got it out of my system" and when we ran out of savings, I would return to full time parish ministry. "Don't quit your day job" is the advice that greets all would-be artists. But was this art, or was this ministry, or was it both? Never mind. There was no way I could quit my day job---until, that is, it became clear to me that there was no way that I could NOT quit my day job.

That God moves in mysterious ways is a sublime understatement. The circumstances of my life having brought me to this point, the hard questions now arose. Did I trust God enough to do this? Could we cut back our budget and keep paying the mortgage? We did the numbers. If I could get SOME work and do

some supply preaching, we thought we COULD live. We would have to dip into our savings perhaps, but our daughter was entering fifth grade and our son would start kindergarten in the fall. There would no longer be daycare expense. My wife Sue and I fretted and prayed and wrung our hands...and took the plunge. I announced my resignation six weeks hence.

Those mysterious ways in which God moves are never straight-line. On the night of my farewell dinner---the last night of a regular paycheck---I promised my wife that we would stop by the drugstore on the way home and 'waste' the money on a home pregnancy test. "It's all in your mind," I told my her, and I was convinced of it, "you're just under a lot of stress." Of course "it" was a little lower than her mind. When the donut formed in the test kit, I poured a scotch and began to cry. I cried for a week. Now I was self-employed (unemployed) minister of biblical storytelling, and soon there would be another mouth to feed! It was a moment of deep despair. Down and out. Where was God? I remembered the Peter's whining to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you!"

Within a few days of discovering that we were pregnant, Sue and I left on a two-week choir tour of England. The choir was composed of alums in their 30s, 40s and 50s, all of whom had sung with a much beloved choral director at Hartwick College. My friends all had older children. They were dealing with empty nest and grandparenthood. Here I was, at 45 years old about to be a father! The humor that was poked our way about this situation helped me to begin to lighten up. In fact, being the butt of the bus jokes was therapeutic. I began to think about this new child as bonus instead of a burden. When we returned from England and I was invited to guest preach, the lectionary texts for the next few weeks were all about the laughter of Abraham and Sarah. I lived in those stories. I felt Abraham's giddy joy. I was grateful for this gift of God, this twist in my life story. And I saw this unintended pregnancy as the covenantal sign and seal of my vocation. When Jesse was born on February 21, 1993, I called him my storytelling baby. He has celebrated every birthday of his young life in Florida, where I have done two weeks of storytelling engagements in each of the last five years!

How the pieces all come together in God's good time! Two little rural churches agreed to contract with me for part time services on an "as available" basis, giving me a base from which to work and a community in which to be grounded. Their generous willingness to be without me half of the year's Sundays reflected their commitment to share me with the world. The Network of Biblical Storytellers also contracted with me to be a consultant to and ambassador for the organization. Within a few years I had performed at the National Storytelling Festival, the Joseph Campbell Festival and at several other national events. Appropriately for a ministry of storytelling, word of my work spread, and more and more work came.

This ministry has taken me all over the United States and to Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Korea, and Israel. I have taught clergy and laity at seminars and workshops and in churches and seminaries from coast to coast---Presbyterians, United Methodists, Roman Catholics, Mennonites, Baptists, Episcopalians and more. Perhaps my greatest thrill was to help Tom Boomershine train 75 biblical storytellers for the 1997 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. I performed in the superdome there for 36,000 youth, many of whom recited parts of Mark's passion narrative along with me, having learned it by heart with the help of the storytellers whom I had trained.

What is the next step God has for this ministry? I don't know; but I will be happily surprised, I'm sure. One day I realized that I had given up worrying about the security issues that had so consumed me at the

beginning. God has cared for me and has opened doors for my ministry again and again. In the words of the hymn, "Tis grace has brought me safe thus far...." No doubt someday this ministry will run its course. My voice will weaken, my strength will flag, my concentration will founder. I hope then to discern my vocation to what is next. But before grace leads me home, I hope to introduce the church of the new millennium to this new/old way of experiencing the stories of God and to make the telling of the stories as commonplace in worship as the reading of the scriptures has been since the Reformation, to re-establish this ancient practice as a way to faith in post-literate culture, to leave a legacy of budding storytellers of all ages in whom the Word lives and breathes and finds the kind of lively expression that changes the world.