

Off the Page, Into the Heart, and Out of the Mouth: Tools for Telling the Stories of Scripture by Heart

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Biblical Storyteller

My Experience as a Biblical Storyteller

Over thirty years ago on my first Palm Sunday as an ordained minister, I decided to perform the Passion Narrative of Mark's Gospel (chapters 14–15) in place of the readings and sermon for the day. As one with a background in theater, I conceived of the venture as "dramatic monologue." A year or so later I had the good fortune to spend several days at a seminar led by Tom Boomershine, founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers.¹ Tom helped me understand that art form of the biblical tradition was not theater, but storytelling. He also taught me that these two genres entail different histories, aesthetics, psychologies, and even theologies. He also inspired and encouraged me, as I had already learned about 15 percent of Mark's narrative, to add on the remaining 85 percent! So began a life in biblical storytelling that would span my professional career, including a 15-year full time ministry as a performer and teacher of biblical storytelling, a vocation in which I am still engaged despite having returned to parish ministry in 2007.²

Since those early days, my repertoire has expanded to include not only the Gos-

pel of Mark, but the material unique to the other four Gospels, half of Genesis, parts of Exodus, Numbers, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Hosea, Job, all of Jonah, Galatians, parts of Acts, and the whole of Revelation. How does one amass such a repertoire? The answer is like the response to the proverbial question of how to eat an elephant: One bite at a time. There are, however, some techniques for the learning of Scripture that I have learned. One purpose of this essay is to share these learnings with you in the hope that they will encourage you to respond to the other purpose: to extend an invitation to you to become a biblical storyteller as well! But first a story about how to approach the process of learning Scripture by heart.

The "M-word"

When my wife and I were pregnant with our first child, we took natural childbirth classes from Sister William Aloysius. (The kindly, humble "Sister William" explained that she had declined the permission extended after Vatican II for nuns to exchange their male saint names for female saint names.) Sister William told us that if we called them "labor pains," they would hurt. We were, therefore, to refer to them by their proper name: "contractions." About thirty hours into labor, I clearly remember my usually gentle wife shouting, "Get Sister William in here!" Nonetheless, there is a modicum of truth to Sister William's asser-

1. www.nbsint.org

2. www.DennisDewey.org

tion that what name we give to something affects how we feel about it. And we have all had bad experiences with what I call the “M-word.”

For me, then, the first answer to the question of how to approach the daunting process of learning a whole book of the Bible by heart is this: Don’t use the word (and it pains me even to type it here) “memorize.” But this is the least of the reasons to eschew the word. More importantly, I think that the modern notion of memorization bears little correspondence both to the process of internalization practiced in antiquity and to the method that I will outline in this essay. I prefer instead to speak of “learning by heart.”

We think of “memorizing” as storing a string of printed text in the brain. Learning by heart (as the anatomical reference would suggest) is a whole-person process involving many dimensions: brain, heart, soul, muscles, senses, bones, the endocrine system, the complete set of one’s life experiences, emotions, memories, musings, relationships, stored images, bodily states, prayer life, and theology—to list but a few! In Hebrew anatomy and physiology, the heart was the center of the person, the place where feeling, thinking, and willing came together. Today we speak of being “centered.” The heart, appropriately located, becomes the focus of the effort to “internalize” the text. (Note that the term “text” originally referred to the *spoken* word. It comes from the same root as “textile” and “texture.” We are all familiar with the metaphors of spinning a yarn or weaving a tale.) Learning by heart, then, is a process that entails much more than simply committing strings of words to the memory of the head.

Modern memory science bears witness to the felt reality of antiquity, namely, that remembering is a creative, constructive process. We do not have little filing cabinets in our head in which are stored whole

memories that we simply pull out, open up, and remember. Instead, bits and pieces are stored through the brain and nervous system and in the other systems of the body. Psychologists talk about how the “body remembers” trauma. (There is a reason we call someone a “pain in the neck”—or some lower anatomical location.) In Ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, who was the mother of the muses, was associated with memory and imagination. Memory was itself conceived of as a creative act. When the Homeric bards sang epics as long as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, they began by invoking the muses to assist in constructing the memories. As a biblical storyteller, I invoke the creative Holy Spirit with much the same earnestness to permeate my being and call out the story from deep within the memory of the heart.

“Memorizing,” as most people understand it, is a linear process: adding words, one after another, like beads on a string. The challenge for performing text memorized in this way is like the problem with the old series Christmas lights of my childhood: when one burns out, the whole string goes dark. The trauma of facing the abyss of that darkness, and the pain of the memory lapse engenders performance anxiety and paralysis. The process of learning by heart, on the other hand, entails learning the text as a whole piece. The structure, imagery, sounds, muscle tensions, visualization, embodiment, and “geography” of this process work together to prevent lapses and to help provide a safety net should the rare blank moment occur. Learning by heart entails the acquisition of the text as a gestalt; the process is not linear but holographic.

The Text Already Alive

As important as the terminology and the understanding of the process of internalization is different from memorizing, so also is

the attitudinal relationship of teller to text different. People often compliment me on a storytelling performance by telling me, “You made it come alive!” I seldom miss a beat in responding: “Thank you kindly, but I believe it already *is* alive; I just try not to *kill* it.” The notion that what we are about in this sacred enterprise is the revivification of a cadaverous text is not only presumptuous, but tends to affect the performance adversely. In fact, to approach the process with this attitude is to assume the role of Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, the bold man of science who at the end of *his* performance laments, “I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.”

If I conceive of myself as doing something “to” the story, my performance will be monster-like. These texts have been around for a long time without my help; my job is not the restoration of a dull, dusty antique, but rather (to borrow Charles Wesley’s words) to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. I try, therefore, to approach the process of learning and performing the texts of Scripture with joyful reverence, with a mixture of delight and fear and trembling. And that brings us to the first step in the process: prayer.

Step One: Prayer

This may seem like a no-brainer, but sometimes the anxiety around so formidable a task as learning a text the length of, say, the Gospel of Mark is so overwhelming that one may forget to breathe. Without prayer, the effort is like that of an athlete who fails to train. The *labora* of biblical storytelling cannot properly be undertaken without prerequisite *ora*.

This sacred art is *oratio divina* in which we join our breath to the performance of the God-breathed text. The performative

act is, in a real sense, enacted prayer. The process of learning a substantial text will be best served by understanding biblical storytelling as a spiritual discipline. In fact, the working definition of biblical storytelling that I have taught in workshops through my ministry is this:

Biblical storytelling is a spiritual discipline that entails the lively interpretation, animation and expression of biblical text that has first been deeply internalized in the context of prayer, and then is remembranced,³ embodied, breathed, and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred act in community with an audience/congregation.

Actually, to call prayer the “first step” is not quite accurate. Prayer needs to suffuse the entire process—from the hard work of learning by heart through the performance event and afterglow of reflection on that experience.

The Real Step One: Reading the Text Aloud

If praying, then, is undertaken “without ceasing,” then perhaps the reading of the text aloud should be labeled the “first step.” Again, this may seem self-evident. And yet my experience in leading seminars, particularly with clergy, and requesting that they take a text and read it aloud is often to find them with the Bible open softly mumbling or reading in total silence! The silent reading of the Bible is so much a part of literate spirituality that, even when instructed to the contrary, that practice seems a challenge to overcome.

3. I coined this word (over the objections of spell-check) to connote the sacramental quality of the experience of learning the story by heart. The recall of the text is more than remembering; it is a sacred event that joins the whole person of the teller with the communal memory of the story across the ages and the inspired collective imagination of the audience for whom it is performed.

With a long work such as the Gospel of Mark this might be undertaken one chapter at a time or one episode at a time. The performed text will, in the end, be sound. The act of reading aloud early in the process of learning entails speaking and hearing oneself speaking; it engages the respiratory system, the vocal apparatus, the partial embodiment of the text in the act of saying it. I like to say that the next step is to read it aloud. And the step after that is to read it aloud. Three is the magic number: at least three read-throughs out loud! As we speak the text in this way, our body memory is logging the position of our tongue, the feel and taste of the words in the mouth, and the rhythms of our breathing. We are beginning to learn below the level of consciousness.

Next Step: See What Is Already There

Next, I close the book and perhaps close my eyes. I want to see what is there without effort. What has stuck? What do I remember about what I have just read? Again aloud, I tell the story to myself in my own words—not worrying about getting the story down word-for-word at this point, but getting the “gist,” becoming aware of the inherently mnemonic structures of narrative, visualizing the scene and characters, paying attention to words and phrases that have been retained effortlessly, the images that float to the surface of memory.

This phase of the learning process is akin to the manner in which we internalize a joke. Seldom do we take dictation when someone is telling a whopper, then to sit down with the script and memorize the words of the joke. Those mnemonic structures of the narrative itself constitute a carrier signal that is internalized effortlessly. We hear a joke, we laugh, and we go on about our business; then, days later, a situation reminds us of

it, we open our mouth and out it comes! In learning biblical stories, it is helpful to become aware of what has already been sorted by attention with little or no effort.

Scripting: Getting It Down On Paper

One of the things we have come to know about the oral culture out of which the scriptures arose is that writing always was done in service to the mnemonics of speaking.⁴ The earliest lists of things written down in ancient Egypt were essentially for the purpose of aiding the memory. The interplay of orality and literacy in antiquity from the period of the David monarchy through the cultures established in the wake of Alexander the Great to communications systems of the Roman Empire was characterized by a rich mutuality. In our post-literate, digital era, the characteristics of oral culture are newly evident; this communications culture is, in the terminology of Walter Ong, “secondarily oral.”⁵ Nevertheless, post-literate does not mean illiterate. We have not ceased to be people who read and write; we are just reading and writing differently and to different ends. The interplay is among systems of writing, speaking, and now digital communication. This next step in the process of internalizing makes use of the technology of writing.

We do not often think about the arrangement of the words on the page. The conventions of print are so well established

4. I have found most intriguing about this relationship Susan Niditch's *Oral World and Written World: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1996) and David Carr's *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 186.

we forget that justified margins were once a new invention. I remember my dismay when, upon returning to grade school after summer vacation, the familiar “see Jane run” book with its one-phrase-*per*-line layout had been supplanted by the “chapter book.” I gazed with horror at the orderly splay of neatly margined print that commenced at one invisible, horizontal line on the left and marched lockstep to another invisible, horizontal line on the right, breaking in mid-sentence, mid-phrase, even mid-word!

The task at this stage of the process of learning the story is, in effect, to return to the First Grade: to abandon the mature aesthetics of balanced columns and rearrange the writing on the page in a way that makes sense for the sense of it. This can be done either chirographically (an adorable word that means “written by hand”) or by word processor. There is much to be said for the practice of actually writing the text out by hand. Making the words by the movement of the hand muscles linked to the hand-eye interaction can be a valuable mnemonic technique. Handwriting also frees up the possibility of writing in curves (or in some creative fashion), instead of being limited exclusively to the straight lines of pixels permitted by word processing.⁶

I must confess, however, that I am too wedded to the computer. My conventions in producing a “script” using this technology are 1) to form a line of text that is about a breath-worth in length and that ends at a sensible place (at the end of a phrase or sentence), 2) to group three lines (or so) together as an “episode,” 3) to indent and print in small caps in bold any text spoken as dialogue, 4) to use parentheses freely as

6. For a generation after the invention of moveable type, people took their printed books to calligraphers to have them copied, because it was widely accepted that *real* books were written by hand, not by a machine.

a means to set off subordinate bits, 5) to render all numbers as numerals, and 6) to use whatever additional markings, fonts, and colors that may serve as *aides de memoire*.

Recent study contends that the Greek-speaking world did not think in words and sentences, but in breaths. The performance of texts (with or without a written script present) was always a two-stage process. The passage would first be committed to memory and then “published,” that is, recited publicly. The miniscule text provides visual evidence of both of these realities. Translated into English, a slice of Mark 1 might look something like this:

and the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness for forty days tempted by satan

These manuscripts had no spaces between the words, no capitalizations, no punctuation—suggesting that one had first to *know* the text before performing it. We are more accustomed to seeing the text displayed this way:

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

But I might script the passage for learning for storytelling in this way:

And the **Spirit** immediately **drove** him out into the **wilderness**.

And he was in the **wilderness** for **40 days, tempted by Satan**.

And he was with the **wild beasts**. And the **angels** waited on him.

Now after John was **arrested**, Jesus came to **Galilee** proclaiming the good news of God and saying:

THE TIME IS FULFILLED,

AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR.

REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS.

Notice in the above example that the word “wilderness” recurs. Tom Boomershine calls the repetition of words “verbal threads.” They are memory hooks. The sounds of the words also help the memory. The “w” sound in “wilderness” and “wild beasts” is a connector. The rhythm of that first episode is cued by the repetition of the word “and,” which functioned in oral culture as aural punctuation. This is why I have “massaged” the NRSV translation to replace the “and” it leaves out in the interest of better literary expression. (I will have more to explore on the subject of massaging the text below.) Sometimes it is helpful to draw pictures in the script, in effect to “storyboard” it with images. Once commissioned to learn Joel 2 for performance at a worship conference, I was having trouble in the “seam” between verses 24 and 25:

²⁴The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

²⁵ I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

In the margin of the script, I drew on my poor artistic skill to figure a wine vat on which was perched my stick figure version of a locust. The transition never failed again.

The lay of the text on the page, the patterns that it exhibits, and the visual cues in the print all reinforce the learning

process. I often work on learning the text by walking around, holding the script in my hand as a reference. Even coffee stains on the page become memory cues at the level of visual text.

Synaesthesia: Stanislavsky Meets St. Ignatius

Moving the story from the page into the heart of the storyteller requires a multifaceted approach, an assortment of techniques and tools. The attention paid the text by all the senses requires concentration, but in the end, the effort is productive. Russian psychologist Alexander Luria’s account of his thirty-year study of a man who seemed incapable of forgetting anything revealed something about the inner workings of the associative properties of memory that lie beyond our consciousness. When the subject was presented with a tone of fifty cycles per second at 100 decibels, he “saw a brown strip against a dark background that had red, tongue-like edges. The sense of taste he experienced was like that of sweet and sour borscht...”⁷

Our effort at learning the text will attempt to find as many sensory associations as possible: to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear the sounds of the story, to be deliberate in finding synaesthetic connections and holding together in conscious awareness these many elements in the experience of rehearsing the text’s unfolding narrative. At the same time, the emotions of the text need exploration. What is the feeling tone? How does that find expression in the range of possible emotional colors? To think of emotions as colors is to run the risk of conceiving of the storytelling process as simply “painting by numbers.” The truth is that emotions come in shades and admixtures. As a pastor who has been

7. A. Luria, *The Mind of Mnemonist*, English translation (Basic Books, 1968), 23.

called upon to comfort a grieving widow, for example, I have often experienced the subtleties of the palette of emotions. In the immediate aftermath of the sudden death of her husband of sixty-some years she is in shock, overcome with grief—the dominant color. And yet he was not the easiest man to live with, and so a little of the color of relief is blended in. But as soon as anything like this is allowed, guilt is added on like shadow.

As I am working my way through the story, I want to spend time reflecting on when I have been in situations in which I have felt emotions like those identified in the story, to connect with those felt memories. This is something like the technique taught by the famous teacher of actors, Constantin Stanislavsky, whose method of emotional honesty came to be known as “method acting.” I have already suggested how important it is to suffuse the learning process with prayer, and I take as my model the “spiritual exercises” of St. Ignatius, who taught that in telling the stories of Jesus we find him present with us. Only semi-facetiously then do I sometimes describe this technique of internalizing the text as “Stanislavsky meets St. Ignatius.” This is another way of looking at the process of learning by heart as a “whole person” process. The deep immersion in the text is to marinate in ideas, feelings, patterns, and images.

Returning to the short passage from Mark 1, for example, I would reflect on what it means to be “driven” by the Spirit into the wilderness. But this wonder would not be merely cerebral. I might get up on my feet, and push myself by the back of the head forward, push, again, PUSH! I might reflect on a time when I have felt driven by a force outside of myself. What was that like? Where is the tension in my body when I remember that feeling? What did my voice sound like in that moment?

I would smell the sand, feel the heat on my skin, taste the dryness in the mouth occasioned by being breathlessly driven into the desert.

The Worth of a Thousand Words

Among the most valuable of the tools in the kitbag of the biblical storyteller is one discovered centuries before Christ by a Greek storyteller named Simonides. The story of his moment of *eureka* is related in Book II of Cicero’s *De Oratore*. Suffice it to say that Simonides discovered that the secret to remembering great quantities of material was the placement of that material in imaginary three-dimensional space. The places in which this material was placed were called *topoi* in Greek, a word that is root of the English “topic” and means “place” (as in “topology” and as in “I seem to have lost my place”).

Visualization of the scene in space is like stepping into a diorama and “seeing” the drama unfold around us. Running visualization as a memory track simultaneously with the other processes outlined multiplies the memory effectiveness. I am “pushed” into the wilderness by the Spirit, and I look around at it. Look! There is Satan, the tempter to my left. I look to the right and there lying in the sand I see a calendar with “40 days” emblazoned on it. I feel the oppressiveness of the desert heat and doubt in my bones that I can endure for such a long time. And look! There are the wild beasts, the wilderness wild beasts! Menacing, hungry, teeth bared! This is a diorama in motion because the wild beasts are now moving out of sight as they are being replaced by angels, angels who bring comfort, consolation, relief, and reminders of God’s purposes.

Related to the visualization of the story is “story geography,” by which I mean not the literal map of the Jordan Valley

in relation to the Judean wilderness, but rather the space around the storyteller, the imaginary places in three dimensions into which I step as a storyteller and in which I “see” the action unfolding in relation to the place my body occupies. This part of the story moves from near to far as Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and then from far to near, as Jesus comes into Galilee proclaiming the good news.

Telling the Text as Bodily Function

It is somewhat misleading to say that humans *have* bodies; it is probably more accurate to say that we *are* bodies. Storytelling is an *embodied* activity. Bodies take up space. They move in ways that communicate. They stand still in ways that do the same. Anyone who plays an instrument with some degree of skill understands “muscle memory.” If I stop to think about every sixteenth note, my fingers will become tangled in the task. I simply trust the muscle memory to execute the moves.

Part of the reason that I always get up and move around as I am working at learning the story is in order to get the story into my musculature, to locate my body in relation to the imaginary story geography around me. As I am beginning to learn the story, I make large gestures and many moves. As I come to know the story, I will pull back somewhat. People sometimes ask if I practice in front of a mirror to achieve the facial expressions I exhibit in telling the stories. The truth is that I do not *know* what I look like; the expressions come from the inside out! I cautioned at the outset not to conceive of the process of learning and telling the story as doing something *to* the story. For the same reason I would never speak of “adding” a gesture. The gesture comes out of my experience of the text. It is not an “add-on” but an “outgrowth.”

Generally, I have found it better to suggest that you enact the story in some “realistic” sense. If the story is about, for example, a character who is described as falling on his knees, I do not literally get down on my knees. Instead I may give a stooping gesture that suggests rather than portrays the action. For one thing, there is no graceful way to get up from one’s knees—especially at my age.

In dialogue, I pick a point toward the audience where each character “looks” when speaking to the other, using the “and she said’s” to move into position as the character—or sometimes simply standing still and letting a shift in head position imply the change of characters. The imaginary sightlines then cross somewhere in the middle of the audience, but the perceived effect is of natural dialogue. If, on the other hand, I position myself “realistically” having the characters face at a right angle to the audience, the effect is “stagy” and unpleasant. When it comes to embodiment in performance, more is less. It is not necessary, for example, to hold up three fingers to accompany saying the number three.

The Indispensable Tool

When I ask in a workshop, “Who has a good memory?” typically fewer than five percent of the participants will raise their hands. The truth is that there is no known limit to how much humans can remember. We can remember whatever we want to and work at. I have offered a brief description of the process and some of the techniques that I have found helpful in learning the biblical stories. But the most important tool of all is the obvious one: repetition.

I hope by now that it is clear that I do not mean the mindless repetition of rote learning. The process I have described is labor-intensive on a different order of magnitude than mere memorizing. Nevertheless, in the end, it proves to be more

productive and results in a more engaging relationship with an audience. Still, we seem to think that learning these stories should be easier than it is. It is not. If one graphs “the number of repetitions on a horizontal axis” against “the felt energy expended” on the vertical axis, the line goes out high and straight for a long, long time. Twenty, thirty, or forty repetitions and it still is not there. Fifty, one hundred—“Maybe that Dewey guy can do this, but I’ll never be able to!” One hundred and ten, one hundred twenty, and then, “Oh, I give up!” But the God’s honest truth is that just out there on the graph a little way beyond where most people quit is the point at which they can know the story in their bones—or, perhaps put more appropriately, they find themselves known by the story.

The learning of the text is hard work. I always tell pastors that the commitment to learn the text to tell in worship is an economic decision. I also happen to think that this pearl of great price is worth the effort. To be able to look a congregation in the eye and tell the story from the heart is an experience unlike any most congregations have known. The immediacy of the Word, the passion involved, and the humanity of the text reach across the span of air between teller and listener and draw them into relationship with each other, into relationship with the text that has been traditioned by the corporate memory of the church, and, finally, into relationship with the God who is behind it all.

‘Here and Now’ vs. ‘There and Then’

At the beginning of my storytelling ministry decades ago, when people still made conversation while in airplanes, I frequently found myself trying to explain biblical storytelling to a seatmate. For one thing, the word “storytelling” seems exclusively to connote activity with children. I would

often find it necessary to say that most of my performance work was with adult or intergenerational audiences—not with children. Then my curious fellow traveler would want to know what kind of stories I tell. The answer “biblical” only served to elicit additional queries. When at length I explained that I tell the stories in the words of the text that has been traditioned to us in translation, the inquirer would ask with amazement, “And people actually *listen*?” Those who have not heard the text told well and faithfully by a skilled teller cannot imagine that there is much difference between the experience of the story read aloud and that of hearing a story told by heart. I frequently begin my workshops by offering these experiences side by side. Asked to identify the differences, the participants always aver that the two are night and day.

The reading (which I attempt to do in a fashion similar to the way in which the text might be read in Sunday worship) is, they say, hard to pay attention to. It sounds like print coming out of the mouth. Some admit that after the first few words are read, they mentally check out, saying to themselves, “Oh yes, I already know this story.” For some, the reading is mainly an exercise in extracting the theological “juice” from the story, a communication that occurs at the level of the head for them to think about in a dispassionate, distanced way. The telling, however, is compelling. Engaging them eyeball to eyeball, the audience is drawn into the story. They cannot *not* pay attention. The story draws them in, connecting at the level of the *solar plexus* and ushering the audience into an imaginative world in which things “happen” in their presence. One respondent put it this way: “The reading was like ‘there and then’; the telling was like ‘here and now.’”

The late, great Don Juel, himself a Markan scholar, wrote in an essay called “The Strange Silence of the Bible”:

I remember the first time I saw the Gospel of Mark “performed” in public. I had regularly begun my lectures on the synoptic Gospels by pointing to the episodic nature of the prose, which many have taken to be the mark of oral sources. Looking at the printed page, it was not difficult to make the case that the narratives were in major ways deficient. . . . The person who “performed” Mark, however, recited in such a way that the breaks in the story were not a problem. The sense of coherence was established in several ways, like changing positions and looking at different sections of the audience. It worked. The audience had little sense that the Gospel was deficient as a narrative. There were gaps and jumps, but the way they were handled by the performer made them enticing rather than irritating and distracting.

I also noted there were times during the performance when people laughed. I did not recall ever laughing to myself when reading through Mark. . . . An interpretation that fails to take into account what happens when written words are spoken seems adequate neither to the “original” setting in which they were spoken nor to the contemporary setting in which they continue to function.⁸

Those who have not experienced the power of biblical storytelling tend to conceive of the prospect as dull and boring, sadly to say in the way that most people experience the reading of the text in worship. They cannot imagine that there can be anything engaging, let alone moving, in simply performing the text as it appears on the page. Where is the creativity in mere recitation of words memorized by rote? Of course, these hypothetical neophytes have not read this essay to discover that the story told well and faithfully entails the artistry of the whole person as teller/

performer! Do people walk out of a recital by Yo-Yo Mah demanding their money back because he only played the notes that Bach wrote?

To conceive of the artistry of biblical storytelling as something akin to playing music is a worthwhile metaphorical understanding. The text is replete with “musical cues” for one who looks for them. As we have noted above, the function of the written text in antiquity was very much like the function of the dots and squiggles of musical notation for the musician performer. The ink on the page is not the music; the music is the music!

Gravitation Pull and Massaging

I find that one good analogy for work of biblical storytelling is jazz. The jazz musician knows the “chart,” knows the notes and is always aware of where he/she is in relation to those notes and yet is not strictly bound by them. As people who have a biblical text (in translation), we are held to account by the gravitational pull of the center of that text. We know, of course, that deep down in the subatomic world, reality is mostly empty space. If the center of the text is the community memory of the event, shaped and reshaped in the telling, the next layer out is the expression of that memory in transcript of performance we call “Scripture.” A further layer out is the translation of that transcript into our own language.

Within the Network of Biblical Storytellers we recognize both the accountability of sticking close to the text and the flexibility that acknowledges that all communication is interpretive and all narrative is “fictive,” that is “made in the moment.” The account of the event is not the event itself. What is left in and what is left out, the perspective from which the event is told, the many changes through which the Holy Spirit has guided pass-

8. *Interpretation*, January 1997, 8.

ing on the memory made in words—all these things suggest a certain flexibility in relation to the actual words. That gets translated in quantitative terms of 95 percent content accuracy and 75 percent verbal accuracy. The wiggle room in the 5 and 25 percent is where I “massage” the text. Sometimes this is simply because the words of the translation are not sufficiently easy to articulate aloud. Sometimes the massaging arises out of an aesthetic need or a pastoral concern.

I have already mentioned my habit of replacing the oral punctuation of the “and’s” removed by the NRSV translators from Mark’s Gospel. In preparing a script for the performance of the Gospel of John years ago, I reached to another translation for something that felt right in my mouth to say what Jesus says when he responds to Mary’s expression of concern at the Cana wedding that they have no wine, and he says, “Woman, why are you getting me involved in this? My hour has not come yet.” Once, in Toronto, when I was performing the Gospel of Mark (which I learned originally in the RSV) for the something-hundredth time, I knew the words of the text at the moment in Gethsemane as Jesus says, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” But the jazz words that came from my heart and out of my mouth that night were these: “I am so full of sorrow that I could die.” I noted those words and kept them. I say them now instead of the exact words of the translation. And I believe the Holy Spirit is involved in that.

There are some who bristle at the word “performance.” The term has become synonymous in our culture with “showing off.” Nevertheless, I want to reclaim the word as appropriate for what we do as sacred storytellers. To per-form is to form completely. Can we seek to do anything less with the texts we hold so dear? Storytelling performance is different from acting in

several ways. Most importantly, the aesthetic of acting is distance; the aesthetic of storytelling, on the other hand, is intimacy. Every telling of the text (like every reading of the text) is an interpretation. There is no “interpretationless” telling (or reading) of the text. In an effort to tell the text with no “taint” of emotion, some have advocated the reverential, flat, expressionless intoning of the text. What that approach fails to appreciate about itself, of course, is that it, too, is an interpretation—one that does not comport well with the storytelling tradition of Israel or with the rabbinical tradition of the first century. All of this is another way of saying, “If it was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me.”

When it comes to performance decisions generally, I try to approach the task with what I call “reverential risk.” I have also been reassured by Kenneth Bailey’s observation that we must always understand the interpretive enterprise as coming to “tentative finality.” The three maxims I encourage in budding biblical stories are these:

Know the story.

Love the story.

Trust the story.

Telling to Eyeballs

One last small but important piece of advice to would-be biblical storytellers: Rehearse with eyeballs looking back at you. The experience of telling to the walls or the trees is nothing like that of telling to breathing beings who are looking back at you. Friends, family, church members, dogs, cats—choose someone/thing with eyes to practice the telling of the story. Listen to the feedback you get from friends about what works and what does not, what is moving and what is confusing. Keep telling, telling, telling until the life of the story resides in you deeply—and you in it—to the glory of God. Amen.