

Performing the Living Word: Learnings from a Storytelling Vocation
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Early in the first year of my seminary education, I had a vivid dream in which I was a participant in an archeological dig in the Judean wilderness. To my astonishment the dream culminated in my discovery of the “Dead Sea Tapes”—ancient audio recordings of the scriptures! I awoke from the dream in fits of laughter and shared with my colleagues this silly, anachronistic hallucination. Many such dreams “die at the opening day,” as Isaac Watts’ Psalm paraphrase attests, but this one I could not shake off. The strange experience impressed itself on my memory so that when, nearly a decade-and-a-half later, I discerned a call to biblical storytelling as my life’s work, I began to understand that dream as prophetic validation. For three decades now I have been telling the stories of scripture—half of those years spent in a full time ministry of storytelling.

On my first Palm Sunday as a parish pastor, I decided to perform the Passion Narrative from Mark’s Gospel² as what I called at the time “dramatic monologue.” (With a background in theater, I still thought of the performance of biblical text as acting. The nomenclature of “biblical storytelling” and my self-identification as “a biblical storyteller” would await my meeting Tom Boomershine.) That Palm Sunday “telling,” as I would later come to call the performance of scripture, was more powerful and stirring than I had anticipated. Its enthusiastic reception by parishioners was evidenced in genuine, heart-felt responses. All were moved. Some wept. Many said, “I have never heard *anything* like that!” Others asked, “Where did you get that *script*?” That some not recognize as scripture the word-for-word performance of Mark’s text struck me. The congregation’s hearing the powerful and dramatic text in that way bore little resemblance to

¹ www.DennisDewey.org

² Mark 14-15

their customary experience of scripture readings as dead, dull and dusty. Suddenly, the Bible was not an antique museum piece to be revered, explicated and ensconced in a display case; they had felt the word in the *solar plexus*.

The following year I registered for a continuing education event called “The Gospel as Storytelling” with a professor of New Testament named Thomas Boomershine. Over the several evenings of that seminar, Tom told the whole of Mark’s gospel. Inspired by Boomershine’s example, I resolved to learn the remaining chapters using the method of “internalization” that Boomershine taught. From that first study I learned that the acquisition of text as sacred memory was older than scripture itself, that even the word “text,” commonly used to denote written or printed words, carries in its etymology and cognates the oral roots of “weaving a tale” or “spinning a yarn” (texture, textile). My appreciation for the differences between oral and literate culture began to inform my understanding of scripture.

Boomershine helped me understand that the ancient, oral world thought differently from the literate world of the academy in which I had done biblical studies—in short, that that world thought in story. This insight was to shape my work profoundly, both as a performer and itinerant pedagogue. Most people regard oral culture as “backward.” As literate people educated in institutions that virtually equate literacy with learning, we carry with us an almost viral assumption that education always required literacy. My slow shedding of this bias, begun in that first encounter with Boomershine, was the first stage of a dawning appreciation of the storied, oral culture of Jesus (who, it must be observed, never wrote a book). This evolving understanding of the role of storytelling in oral culture helped both validate my sense of call to this ministry and revalue storytelling as urgent and timely.

Boomershine further reminded me that theater/drama and storytelling are distinctive *genres* with different aesthetics and different histories. Theater's aesthetic is indirect, the aesthetic of illusion, which entails the shared suspension of disbelief as the audience pretends that the action on stage is real and the actors pretend that no audience is present. Storytelling's aesthetic, on the other hand, is direct. The storyteller is the storyteller. The storyteller looks at the audience. The audience responds interactively. The storyteller relates directly to the audience as narrator. There is no "illusion" save the transient adoption of a character by the storyteller in dialogue. The energy exchange between storyteller and listener is palpable and immediate. Theater's energy is indirect, mediate, askew, not face-to-face.

Theater was ubiquitous in the Roman period,³ but Jesus almost certainly did not attend. Theater was associated with the Greco-Roman culture and religions. The Jews, who had little visual art because of the proscription against graven images, had storytelling as the centerpiece of their culture. With Boomershine's help, I began to think of myself no longer as an actor/dramatist, but rather as an artist in continuity with a performance tradition of even greater antiquity: storytelling.

As notice of my performance of the Gospel of Mark spread by way personal networks and word of mouth, the invitations to perform it increased. I began to integrate biblical storytelling with my pastoral work and with parish worship. When my third pastorate came to be characterized by persistent conflict, I underwent a career counseling process that surfaced the discernment that, in the best of all possible worlds, my vocation would be "biblical storyteller." In the real world, however, I had to make a living and support my family. I could not see past my anxiety over economic concerns to any version of reality which included the pipedream of a

³See Lawrence L. Welbourne, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005).

vocation to biblical storytelling. The leap finally came when the intensity of the pain exceeded the level of anxiety. A leap of faith is sometimes facilitated when one is being pursued by a crowd with guns drawn! I up and quit. Now the fulfillment of the Dead Sea Tapes dream was at hand! My wife was supportive. I would become follow my dream and become a biblical storyteller—while I looked for a “real job.” The younger of our two children was about to start kindergarten, and so we would no longer have daycare expense. We could live simply, pare our budget to the bone, and survive on my wife’s income and some modest savings if I could get *some* paying work as an itinerant storyteller.

The night of my farewell dinner in the parish of pain, we learned that my wife was pregnant. Now I was a 44-year-old unemployed storyteller with a baby on the way. Nothing in the prophetic dream or vocational discernment process had indicated that the way would be easy. Straightaway I called Boomershine to tell him of my decision. In his inimitably generous way, he encouraged me to follow this calling and invited me to meet with him in Dayton, Ohio, and I undertook the trip as vocational pilgrimage. Tom helped me think through practical ways in which this new vocation might work, gave me a supportive critique of my performance of Mark’s Gospel, and affirmed and validated both my call and my gifts. Taking to heart his concern that I would not be able to make a living merely by performing, I developed at his suggestion an educational component—offering myself to churches as a combination performer/teacher. Boomershine provided me with a bibliography to deepen my theoretical understanding and invited me to register for a week-long seminar in biblical storytelling that he was to lead, generously offering to meet with me between sessions to explain the methodology, that I might replicate it in my own workshops. In the ancient tradition of the great bard/mentor, he freely gave of himself in support of my nascent ministry.

That full time ministry of biblical storytelling spanned the next fifteen years, taking me to churches, colleges, festivals, seminars, conferences and similar venues in 39 states with more than two dozen denominations as well as to Canada, Korea, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Israel/Palestine, Greece, Spain and Turkey. The culmination of this ministry came when I co-mentored a Doctor of Ministry group in biblical storytelling with my mentor-now-colleague and friend, Tom Boomershine.

At the same time I became involved with the organization Boomershine had formed with his colleague, Adam (Gil) Bartholomew: The Network of Biblical Storytellers. “NOBS” became for me the nexus of many rewarding personal relationships as well as the matrix of my developing skills and deepening understanding of my craft, art and spiritual discipline. Working with and for the Network in a variety of capacities over the years, I came to appreciate the variety of approaches to biblical storytelling and to the ways in which telling the stories can have profound effects on tellers and listeners. A regular feature of the Annual NOBS Festival Gathering is the “Epic Telling,” a communal effort at performing at one sitting a whole book or major portion of a book from the First or Second Testament. Over the years these Epic Tellings included the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Luke, the Joseph Cycle, the first half of Genesis, Esther coupled with the Letter of James, the first part of Acts, and other major pieces of scripture. Without fail, the response at the conclusion of these tellings was exhausted elation—a lot of hugging and “high-fiving” and a sense that we had together witnessed something as ancient and profound as it was current and inspiring. Working first as a consultant to the board of NOBS and then as the organization’s Executive Director, all of our administrative work was always undertaken in the context of learning and telling to one another the stories of scripture. The deep, caring relationships developed in the Network were “storied”

relationships—formed, nurtured, lived out in the context of a this art form and spiritual discipline. Those of us who participated in the NOBS community knew the power and creative energy behind performing the text as story—what our British friends refreshingly called “text telling.” To those who had never experienced it, however, the thought of “merely reciting” the words of scripture seemed like a rather dull enterprise. “Where is the creativity in that?” they would demand. I did formulate this “provisional” definition:

Biblical Storytelling a spiritual discipline which entails the lively interpretation, expression and animation of a narrative text of the Old or New Testaments which has first been deeply internalized and is then remembranced⁴, embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred event in community with an audience/congregation.

But, as I always hasten to point out in my workshops, a *definition* of something (say, sex, for example) is not the same thing as (and often a poor substitute for) the *experience* of that thing. I soon learned that talking about biblical storytelling was a poor polemical strategy. The best approach began with the invitation, “Let me tell you a story.”

Among the important *learnings* that I have gleaned from the biblical storytelling life is how traditional exegesis has failed to appreciate the humor in so many of the stories of scripture. How could something that was so much fun be so important? Short answer: Perhaps “important” and “fun” are not mutually exclusive categories. I cannot help but think that Elijah’s enigmatic response to Elisha’s request for a double portion of the spirit given to the other prophets can only be understood in light of its comedic sense. “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not,” says

⁴ I coined the term “remembranced” to reflect the mysterious reality experienced in storytelling whereby the events of the past become present in the telling. The term is deliberate in its association with the Words of Institution in the Eucharist, “Do this in *remembrance* of me.”

Elijah.⁵ My storyteller's sense tells me that this assertion in the classically structured story (cf. Goldilocks and the Three Bears) must be understood with tongue in cheek as if to say, "If you *happen* to be around, this can be done." (Of *course* Elisha will be around! Despite three consecutive attempts by his mentor to warn him away, Elisha has stuck to him like glue, following him from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho and from Jericho across the Jordan!) The pointed humor of the blind man in John 9 always gets a laugh when he says to his interrogators, who persist in questioning how he has regained his sight, "*Hhhhhhhhhh*, [storyteller's exasperated breath added] I've told you already; why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to be his disciples, too?" In Mark's gospel the dimwitted response of the disciples to Jesus' feeding of the 4,000 (despite their having just witnessed his multiplication of the loaves and fishes for the 5,000) sets up the comedy of errors in the boat story that follows as Jesus blows off steam to them about his encounter with the Pharisee, and they misunderstand him to be citing the fact that they have forgotten to bring bread with them. The rubric implicit in the storytelling structure of Matthew's genealogy demands that the final repetition of "fourteen generations" belongs to the audience; when I perform it that way, the release of energy is always marked by the hearers' knowing smiles and chuckling sighs. That we have managed to squash the humor out of these stories is a consequence of reading them as scripture instead of hearing them as stories.

The overall effect of having these stories "by heart" and hearing them come alive has been for me to discern the radical openness of grace, the power of forgiveness and the joy that is God's intention for all life. My career as a biblical storyteller has led me to the realization that mine is a sheltered and protected life. I feel the call of God to move out of that and into more

⁵ II Kings 2:10

vulnerable/available spirituality that is enacted in mission. Some of the most truly spiritual moments of my storytelling ministry have been telling in Spanish the Mark's story of Jesus calming the sea to a group of Mayan children outside their thatched hut in Copan, Honduras, and telling in Afrikaans to a mixed race congregation in South Africa the story of Jesus washing of the disciples feet, or of telling the passion narrative from John's gospel during Holy Week in a Houston street mission. Having the stories by heart, I have come to believe, was the core activity of spiritual development for ancient Israel and the early church. I hold this conviction as much by dint of experience as by the fruits of my research.

My work, my faith as a biblical storyteller has, for example, led to some profound changes in my understanding of canon. Perhaps it is not too extreme an opinion to venture (from a purely socio-historical point of view) that Jesus of Nazareth would have had a problem with the notion of canon that evolved following his time on earth. I can easily imagine that Jesus the storyteller would resist the codification of the stories of his ministry in to four gospels and the further collection of those into a "New Testament" of the "Holy Bible." All that I have learned from living with Jesus in his stories points in another direction—*away* from the tendency to "build booths,"⁶ to enforce limits⁷ and fix boundaries.⁸ Storytelling has helped me come to see rigid religion as potentially inimical to true faith. My storied spirituality has moved me toward skepticism about truth claims expressed in purely propositional form—particularly those which are exclusive. Storytelling the biblical texts has made me less tolerant of doctrinaire religion, which often substitutes its a system for the creating, living God. My conviction is that important truth is always rich, usually paradoxical and often ironic, and so is best expressed in story, in

⁶ Mark 9:5

⁷ Mark 9:40; Luke 13:10-17

⁸ John 4:7-42

metaphor, in acts of kindness, in the wonder of silence, in active listening.

I am often repulsed by the ideas, words and actions of those who identify themselves as “Christian.” I wonder if reclaiming the storyteller who is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”⁹ might just temper the obsessive-compulsive disorder that so often masquerades as Christianity in our culture. With Parker Palmer, “I find it hard to name my beliefs using traditional Christian language because that vocabulary has been taken hostage by theological terrorists and tortured beyond recognition.”¹⁰ Storytelling has moved me in my own faith journey toward the edge, and there, ironically, I believe, to find the center.

All this began for me with Boomershine’s initial insight about original orality of scripture set me on a course of research, reflection, teaching and performing over the course of those years. I came to understand that most of what we, as literate people, think about the Bible as a literary document is not only wrong but 180 degrees from right. Our “documentary bias” became the dominant paradigm through which I came to understand scripture and a primary emphasis in my teaching the theory, practice, art and spiritual discipline of biblical storytelling.

The word “word” in scripture almost always refers to the spoken word. God *said*, “Let there be light”; God did not write it. Spoken words have power. They do things. They accomplish purposes. They happen in time. The written/printed text, as we have it in the Bible, is a transcript of a performance, the fossil record of a lively storytelling tradition. This understanding helps the practitioner of biblical storytelling to approach this performance art as “recovery” or “discovery” of what is already in the text. The performer does not interpolate, embellish or elaborate. The biblical storyteller is a spelunker, not a decorator.

⁹ Hebrews 12:2

¹⁰ Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of the Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), xxi.

I once asked my grandmother what it was like for her when, as a child, when her family first had the house wired for electricity. Her response surprised and puzzled me. “My whole world,” she said, “suddenly became dark.” I had assumed, of course, that the technological “improvement” of electrical service would have done just the opposite. But she explained to me that, before electricity, the house was supplied with gas lights. At dusk her father would light all the lights of the house, and the house was filled with light. But when the house was wired and each room had its own incandescent bulb hanging from a wire, her father made her turn out the light (in those days one did actually *turn* out the light) when she left a room. So much for my assumptions about the advent of electricity! The direction in which Boomershine pointed me led to me to conclude most of what document-based scholarship has concluded is similarly misguided through its systematically anachronistic retrojections—the casting backwards its tacit assumptions about the technology of literacy. The high-literate approach to the stories of scripture may be more obscuring than enlightening. The gain is attended by a loss. The significant gains made possible by the technologies of literacy had a shadow side. Downloading the communal memory to storage on inked pages represented a change in the relationship of story to community. Plato’s Socrates gave expression to this in the *Phaedrus*:

....[T]his discovery of yours [writing] will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.¹¹

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, cited from <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/phdrs10.txt> accessed 06/04/08.

The ancient philosopher's misgivings about the shift from oral to literate communication finds resonance with some of the attitudes that attend the shift from a literate a digital culture. In her recent study of the reading brain, Maryanne Wolf cites this parallel:

...[Q]uestions raised more than two millennia ago by Socrates about literacy address many concerns of the early twenty-first century. I came to see that Socrates' worries about the transition from an oral culture to a literate one and the risks it posed, especially for young people, mirrored my own concerns about the immersion of our children into a digital world. Like the ancient Greeks we are embarked on a powerfully important transition--in our case from a written culture to one that is more digital and visual.

I regard the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, when Socrates and Plato taught, as a window through which our culture can observe a different but no less remarkable culture making an uncertain transition from one dominant mode of communication to another.¹²

I write the present essay aboard a ship in the Aegean Sea as I lead a group on a biblical storytelling pilgrimage. We have just departed Kusadasi, Turkey, having spent the afternoon touring ancient Ephesus. In the shade trees adjacent to the ancient port and in view of the theater that was already old in Paul's time, we heard the story of the riot of the silversmiths.¹³ Again, as is inevitably the case, the listeners were moved by the power and energy of the spoken word—not read from the page, but recited by heart, told as though coming from inside the teller as indeed it was. In this place, I am reminded of the connection of memory to spoken language and storytelling and see the parallels behind the shifts in the culture of ancient Greece and those of the biblical tradition.

For centuries the stories that Homer drew on to create his epics had been sustained by oral tradition and held in the memories of the *aoidoi* [singer-poets]. But with the ancient stories being written down, life was going out of them.... Memory had been the chief

¹² Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 70.

¹³ Acts 19:21-41

gift and instrument of the *aoidos*. Not the short-term memory of retaining stories from a written document to be recited the next day, but a memory that spanned generations and held the inheritance as a sacred trust, for otherwise it would be lost. Memory personified in Greek thought was the mother of the Muses....

Once the storyteller's lore was written down and sealed forever in the letters of the written word, the Muses became dispensable. The strong feeling was that the Muses departed when the words were written and with them the authority that verified and testified to the myths and folk tales as recited by the inspired *aoidos*.¹⁴

The rediscovery of the vitality of the oral tradition, learning the stories as sounds and images, telling the stories with passion and excitement was illuminating—not with the glaring incandescent glow of the bare bulb, but with the warm, suffusing glow of the flame.

Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the historical scene in the midst of a culture which was semi-literate, but fundamentally oral. Some could read, but most did not as there was precious little to be read. As Richard Horsley has observed about the politics of literacy in Galilee of the first century of the Common Era, the Gospel of Mark pits Jesus and his non-literate entourage against the literate “machine” of the temple system, which is in oppressive cahoots, as it were, with the Roman occupiers—for all of whom literacy is a technology of subjugation, a tool of oppression.¹⁵ Jesus scathingly indicts the scribes, who will “receive greater condemnation” because they use their technological skill to “devour widow’s houses.”¹⁶ It is even within the realm of possibility that Jesus never mastered literacy skills whatsoever. As John P. Meier notes,

¹⁴ John Harrell, *Origins and Early Traditions of Storytelling* (Kensington, CA: York House, 1983), 47.

¹⁵ Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001) 198.

¹⁶ Mark 12:38-40

“...in an oral culture one could theoretically be an effective teacher...without engaging in reading or writing. So the question remains: Was Jesus literate or illiterate?”¹⁷

Furthermore, all of what was read in antiquity was read aloud, usually in public. The very physical act and common understanding of the process reading, as Susan Niditch¹⁸ has convincingly argued, was quite different from what we, as people who live in world of books—50,000 of them newly brought to print each year in the US alone!—think of as “reading” two millennia later. The two communication systems, oral and literate, interacted with each other—sometimes in symbiosis, sometimes in tension, and often even in conflict with one another. The oral communication of sacred “texts” (a word which, as noted above, originally denoted oral performance) was generally considered to be superior to the written version, in part because the living voice renders the communication an experience of vitality. Papias, Bishop of Heiropolis, *circa* 130 C.E. sought to find those still living who had had some acquaintance with the first disciples, because, he said, “I did not suppose that what I got from books would help me as much as the living, surviving voice.”¹⁹ The oral tradition was considered not only more vital and expressive, but more durable, trustworthy, and accurate as well. After all, a written text could be secretly amended or edited “out of earshot” of the community. One can almost imagine a hypothetical parent of this transitional time exclaiming, “These kids and their books today! When I was a kid, you had to know something! What is the world coming to if you look everything up in a book?”

¹⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 268.

¹⁸ Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 1996).

¹⁹ Robert Pattison, *On Literacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 71.

An echo of this preferential option for the oral may be found in the dialogue between Jesus and the Devil in Luke's account of the temptation in the wilderness.²⁰ Jesus counters the first two temptations (to turn stone into bread and to worship the Devil for personal gain) by responding, "It is written..." (*gegraptai*). The Devil then puts him on the peak of the temple wall and invites Jesus to throw himself down, because, the Devil says, "It is *written*, 'God will give his angels charge of you to protect you....' But Jesus counters with, "It is *said* (*eiretai*)...." In other words, "it is said" trumps "it is written." For me, the implications of the scriptures original orality represented paradigm shift not unlike those that from time to time have characterized various other fields of scientific inquiry, "variations on the theme of the folktale, 'The Emperor's New Clothes' in which the obvious is overlooked, then rediscovered in a way that makes one wonder, 'How could we not have seen it all along?'"²¹ As a seminary-trained pastor, I appreciated the historical-critical method as the basis of solid exegesis, but as a practitioner of storytelling, I came to see this product of Enlightenment scholarship as dried fruit, nutritious, but not particularly delicious. I cautioned my students to eat enough of it to be healthy, but not to neglect the sweet, juicy experience of trusting the story as it has come to us, ripe and succulent. Its importance is secondary and supplemental to the process of deep internalization of the text, of living with the text inside oneself and living inside the text. As David Rhoads' convincingly cogent argument²² for a new "performance criticism" of biblical texts suggests and as my own experience as a storyteller attests, it is possible to read and read, not hear at all. Hearing the stories told well and faithfully is like hearing them "again for the first time." In my workshops I

²⁰ Luke 4:1-13

²¹ Dennis Dewey, A Sea Change in Biblical Studies: Biblical Storytelling Scholarship in *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* (Indianapolis: The Network of Biblical Storytellers, 2006), p.48.

²²David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Discipline in Second Testament Studies" (Part One and Part Two) *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (2006).

often read a story from Luke's gospel and then tell that same story. When asked to articulate the differences, participants invariably cite that the "telling" is more lively, more memorable, more embodied, more engaging and much more affective. Although they have just heard the same story read, the telling that follows seems fresh and new. As one participant once described the experience, "Hearing the story *read* is like 'then and there'; hearing and seeing (note that storytelling is multi-sensory) the story told is like 'here and now.'"

Both as storytellers and as story listeners, we relate differently to the texts of scripture when they are externalized in print and when they are internalized and told. I have come to distinguish between learning in the head and learning in heart. The former I equate with "memorization." The latter I call "internalization." The distinction is more than semantic. As Daniel Goleman observes, "The emotional/rational dichotomy approximates the folk distinction between "heart" and "head"; knowing something is right "in your heart" is a different order of conviction somehow, a deeper kind of certainty than thinking so with your rational mind."²³ The spiritual mnemonic is not so much cerebral as it is cardiological. The heart, the center of the person in Hebrew anatomy, is the primary repository for the tradition. The written text is storage, back-up. The touchstone of First Testament spirituality is the *Shema*,²⁴ which counsels the story-formed community to teach the stories and commandments of God to the children (catechize), to talk about them constantly (theologize), to wear reminders of them on the wrists and foreheads (symbolize), and to write them on the doorposts and gates (publicize). But the very first instruction that follows the *Shema* is this: "All these things that I command you this day shall be upon your heart" (internalize). The process of "heart learning" is not the same as the rote

²³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995, 8f.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

memorization of words.²⁵ Rather it entails the deep internalization of images, feelings, complexes of meaning that are “dressed” in the words that have been traditioned to us (in translation) in scripture. The professional storytelling community eschews word-for-word storytelling. I was once taken to tasks by one such well-known professional for calling myself a “biblical storyteller.” “Storytellers,” he argued, “do not memorize scripts; actors do. You are not a storyteller; you’re an actor.” But of course, I was able to respond, I do not *memorize*. I learn *by heart*—a process that entails deep immersion in the text, the internalization not just of sounds but of feelings, images, complexes of visualizations of setting, character and narrative structure, all of it “clothed” with the words of the text. The process used by some actors shares some features of what I call “learning by heart” or “internalizing,” but typically an actor’s lines are “flushed” as new roles are learned. Learning by heart has more staying power, in part because the words are not just spoken, but prayed. The vocalization of the stories is prayer that begins with the breath that first animated humankind. Again reflecting on the resonance for our own time of Plato/Socrates’ misgivings about the implications of the shift from orality to literacy, cultures, Maryanne Wolf observes:

Once a year I ask my undergraduate students how many poems they know “by heart”—a curiously lovely, anachronistic phrase. Students of ten years ago knew between five and ten poems; students today know between one and three. This small sample makes me wonder anew about Socrates’ seemingly archaic choices. What are the implications for the next generations, who may commit even less to memory—whether it is fewer poems or even, for some, only part of the multiplication tables? What

²⁵ Perhaps there is an oblique reference to this in what the Apostle Paul intended his contrasting of the inferiority of written letters of recommendation to the living, breathing people being recommend (II Corinthians 3:1-11). No doubt dictating to an amanuensis this “letter” that was to be recited to the church at Corinth, Paul observes, “The letter kills, but the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) gives life” (3:6).

happens to these children when the electricity goes out, the computer breaks down, or the rocket's systems malfunction? What is the difference in the brain's pathways connecting language and long-term memory for our children and the children of ancient Greece?²⁶

My “Dead Sea Tapes” dream is now anachronistic in both temporal directions; no one uses tape anymore. But I have learned that there is something post-modern in the pre-modern. The spell-binding experience of story well told, the images that held audiences' imaginations captive for millennia, the movement to a beat that arrested attention and focused it, the community-building phenomenon of the storyteller's weaving virtual reality—all these find receptivity in post-literate culture. Although I have returned to parish ministry and do my performances and workshops on a reduced scale, I continue to see biblical storytelling as the foundation of my ministry—even of my parish ministry. I have become convinced, as I wrote in a new stanza for the hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story”

The church that lies before us is not the church of old;
The changes in world culture demand new vision bold.
The path for being Christian in this post-modern age
Winds through our storytelling—our ancient heritage!
Rejected from the quarry, this cornerstone of glory,
Remains a fresh, new story for ages yet to come.²⁷

The Third Century theologian Tertullian famously challenged the philosophical overlay of theology by asking, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The question for the 21st Century biblical scholarship and practice is “What has the ancient storytelling tradition of Israel and the gospel storytelling tradition of the First Century to do the culture of the iPod, the DVD, mp3 and the God-knows-what-technology-is-next?” Tom Boomershine answered that question for me

²⁶ Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 75.

²⁷ Dennis Dewey, “I Love to Tell the Story,” © 2006 by Dennis Dewey

thirty years ago, and my life in storytelling has and my life in storytelling has confirmed its truth:
“Everything.”