

Everything that happens in life
can happen in a show
You can make 'em laugh
You can make 'em cry
Anything, anything can go

The clown with his pants falling down
Or the dance that's a dream of romance
Or the scene where the villain is mean
That's Entertainment!

The lights on the lady in tights
Or the bride with the guy on the side
Or the ball where she gives him her all
That's Entertainment!

From "That's Entertainment!"
Lyric by Howard Dietz, from the MGM Picture, "The Band Wagon"

That's Entertainment? Dennis Dewey, Biblical Storyteller

In the days when dourness was the homiletical norm, there was a preacher of cheerful disposition who was accustomed beginning his sermons with joke. His critics claimed that laughter was an inappropriate response to the Word rightly preached, and one respected colleague admonished him, "You should feed your flock with spiritual food, not with the pap of entertainment," to which the preacher replied, "When I entertain 'em and they open their mouths to laugh, THAT'S when I feed 'em the spiritual food!"

Neil Postman's 1985 critique of the shift that has taken place in contemporary communications culture (*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*) echoes the concern of many preachers and teachers in the church today that worship and education are being "dumbed down" in an effort to entertain. But I believe that the word "entertainment" needs to be reclaimed from its exile to the land of the pejorative. And I believe that a church that claims a storyteller as the pioneer and perfecter of its faith ought to re-examine the notion that storytelling is for children and other people who cannot think critically.

Telling the biblical story well and faithfully by heart is a spiritual discipline. To hear it so told is a spiritual experience. It is also very entertaining. How can one truly HEAR Jonah and not marvel at its humor? How can one HEAR the sequence of feeding stories in Mark and not chuckle when Jesus asks his disciples, "Why are you talking about not having any bread?!" How can one HEAR the story of Elijah and Elisha, who follows his mentor like a shadow from place to place, and not be amused by the tongue-in-cheek response of Elijah to his disciple's difficult request for a double dose of the prophetic spirit—that this can only be possible if Elisha happens to be, as it were, around when Elijah is taken away?

Stories engage us. And one way that stories engage is by being entertaining. Stories "work" at the level of feeling, hooking the listener in the gut. We laugh, cry, wonder, sigh, fear and experience release as stories unfold.

At one Saturday night family worship service a couple years ago, I was telling the dramatic story of Martha's encounter with Jesus after the death of her brother Lazarus. A father sat in the front row, holding his little boy of about four years of age. The boy sat directly in my

line of sight as I spoke Jesus' profound pronouncement and penetrating question to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life...do you believe this?" Before my Martha could respond to her Lord's question, that wide-eyed little boy immediately and vigorously nodded his assent, as if to say, "Yes! Yes! Oh, yes, I do!"

I recall a similar experience at a parochial school in Cincinnati where I was performing the story of Noah and the flood to a room full of kindergartners. When I reach the climactic moment in the story and spoke these words with great earnestness and gravity: "...And all flesh died that moved upon the earth," a little doe-eyed girl in the front responded audibly, "Whew! I'm glad I wasn't there!" But, of course, she WAS.

That is the whole point of storytelling: it takes us "there." My audiences tell me that the difference between hearing a Bible story read aloud and hearing the story told well and faithfully to them by heart is the difference between "then and there" and "here and now." Every telling is a happening in the moment. I believe that every good and faithful telling issues a tacit invitation to its listeners to enter into a sacred story space where they are held close to the heart of God.

Look at the etymology of the word *entertain*. It comes from *inter* + *tenere* and means "to draw in." I think there is good theological sense behind our engaging in a communicative act that draws not only teller and listener together, but binds them in a living tether with the sound-and-breath story that has been told, heard, retold, heard again and traditioned to us by a glorious cloud of witnesses. What could be better worship or education than that which finds teller, listeners, the communion of saints, and the God whose story is told all bound together in a sacramental moment of experience? Now THAT'S entertainment!

Dennis Dewey, is a self-described "minister of storytelling," a ministry which he describes as "helping people hear the biblical stories again for the first time." He has performed and led storytelling seminars all over the United States and Canada as well as in The United Kingdom, Europe, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa Korea and Israel. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), he has been engaged full time in this itinerant, ecumenical ministry of biblical story since 1992. He also leads storytelling travel to Greece ("Stories of the Journeys of Paul"), to Scotland/England ("Stories of the Celtic Saints") and to Israel/Palestine ("Stories of Jesus"). More about Dennis may be found at his website www.DennisDewey.org or at the website of the Network of Biblical Storytellers www.nbsin.org.