

What Is “Biblical Storytelling?”  
Dennis Dewey 2004

As a full time biblical storyteller, I’m asked this question frequently. Typically, I’m in an airplane en route to, say, the Midwest to spend a weekend with a church, conducting a workshop, giving a performance, telling stories in worship. The man in the seat next to me makes small talk and then pops the question, “So what do you do?”

Anticipating the direction of this conversation, I reply warily, “I’m a storyteller.”

“Really!?” he asks with genuine interest. “So, what?— you work with children? Libraries and that kind of thing?”

“No, actually,” I clear my throat—I’ve had this conversation before, hundreds of times, and the *deja vu* is palpable, “I perform mostly for adults. Often with intergenerational audiences, sometimes with audiences composed of children, but mostly with adult audiences.

“What kind of stories do you tell?” I knew that this was then next question; it always is.

“I’m a *biblical* storyteller; I tell the stories of the Bible. I work mostly with churches and church groups”

“No kidding! What, then, you make up little stories about the Bible, stories with a moral?”

Trying not to grimace, I respond politely, “No, I just tell the stories as they are in the Bible.”

“You mean you make up stories based on the characters in stories in the Bible?” The puzzlement and incredulity are growing.

“No, I just perform the texts as they have come to us, pretty much as they are found in the Bible—close to word-for-word.

“An people actually *listen*?”

By the grace of God, people *have been listening* to me perform the stories of scripture for over twenty years. Again and again I am told, “I’ve been going to church all my life, but I never really got it until now!” We are so accustomed to hearing the stories of scripture delivered DOA (dead on arrival), that we have forgotten that Israel and the early church were lively storytelling communities. The narrative bits of scripture (which comprise something like 80% of the texts of the First and Second Testaments) are, in a sense, the fossil record of that lively tradition. Unfortunately, our experience of them has been as of fossils rather than living, breathing, amusing, challenging, scary, laughing, weeping stories.

Some will object that merely memorizing the stories and reciting them word-for-word cannot be a very creative enterprise, and one would be hard pressed to imagine such a presentation as engaging. The mechanical recitation of memorized text is not what I advocate, nor is it what I practice. Rather, I approach the text using a process which I call “learning by heart.” No one has ever stormed out of a Yo-Yo Ma concert demanding a refund on the grounds that the performer “only played the notes that Bach wrote.” Learning the stories by heart and telling them with the whole of one’s heart, mind, soul and strength is akin to the virtuoso performance of fine music; the creativity is not what is *added* (as though it were necessary to “fill in the gaps” in the story, but in what is discovered lying deep in the text and brought out in gesture, timing, tone of voice, characterization! This is a process to which I sometimes refer only semi-facetiously as “St. Ignatius meets Stanislavsky.”

And so my definition of biblical storytelling: “Biblical Storytelling is a spiritual discipline which entails the lively interpretation, animation, expression of a narrative text that has first been deeply internalized and then is “remembranced” ( I used the coinage deliberately), embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred act in community with an audience/congregation.”

When we take these stories into our deepest places and live with them, marinate in them, we find ourselves, paradoxically, in the stories—up close and personal with characters we had until this time regarded as two-dimensional cut-outs, with feelings that are as varied and subtle as the palate of human emotions, with stories we had previously understood only as vehicles for theological ideas and experienced by way of having had a “point” made. To live and breathe the stories in our very musculature is to change the way we experience God and, by extension, the way in which our audiences experience God. That’s biblical storytelling!

Dennis Dewey is a Master Biblical Storyteller who describes his work as “helping people hear the biblical stories again for the first time.” He has performed and lectured all over the United States and Canada as well as in Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Korea and Israel/Palestine and South Africa. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), he has been engaged full time in this itinerant, ecumenical storytelling ministry since 199 and has served as Executive Director of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, an international organization whose mission is to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories ([www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org)). Among hundreds of his venues have been the National Storytelling Festival, Princeton Theological Seminary's Institute of Theology, the Joseph Campbell Festival, Oxford University, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Lutheran National Youth Triennium and national television appearances.