
Shaped by *the* Story:

Narrative, Formation, and the Word

Barbara Horkoff Mutch

Many years ago, as the story is told, when forces of evil threatened the Jewish people, the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov would make his way deep into the forest to a holy place, light a fire, and pray.

When he had done these three things, a miracle would occur, and the people would be saved.

In the next generation, when his disciple had occasion for the same reason to intercede on behalf of his people, he would make his way into the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I know the place, and I am still able to say the prayer. This must be sufficient."

A miracle would occur and the people would be saved.

Many years later, when trouble stalked the Jewish people, their leader would go into the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire. I cannot pray the prayer, but I do know the place, and this must be sufficient." A miracle would occur, and the people would be saved.

Finally, not so many years ago, a misfortune like no other threatened the Jewish people. Sitting in an armchair, their leader placed his head in his hands and said to God, "I cannot light the fire. I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was. And it was.'

I have always loved stories. An avid reader as a child, I still find myself packing too many books on trips, convinced there are few things worse than being far from home and running out of things to read. There is an amazing power to story, and it is clearly linked to salvation, as shown in this small Jewish tale.

Moreover, the connection

between story and salvation is revealed throughout Scripture. The event of the Exodus marked Israel as a people who had been saved by God. More than the experience of the Exile, which gave them their passion for worship, more even than Sinai, which gave them the Law and the Covenant, the Exodus was the formative event for Israel. Their primary memory

was of liberation, and the nation spent the rest of their days telling that story. Israel understood that salvation and story belong together. Israel's prayer book, the Psalms, reverberates with the retelling of the story of their salvation and the God who had saved them. "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned

the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.... Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me" (Psalm 66:5, 6, 16 NRSV). God did something for Israel as a people, and they learned to know God through the recounting of that saving act. Learning and telling the story of what God had done formed the substance of Israel's spiritual formation.

The early church also knew the power of story. The earliest Christian preaching did not take the form of an argument for the existence of God. It was neither an apologetic for the Resurrection nor a debate for the divinity of Christ. The first preaching of the gospel simply recited the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and told what had happened to the disciples.² When those early preachers were asked to explain what they meant when they spoke of salvation and redemption and revelation, they turned to the story of Jesus and of their lives, saying, "What we mean is this event which happened among us and to us."

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15:3–8, NRSV).

"This is what happened," Paul declared. "Christ died, and he was buried, and he rose again, and he was seen by a whole lot of people, and I saw him, too! This happened, and it happened to me." Again and again, the apostles told the story of what had happened to them, establishing a pattern worthy of attention. Salvation and story belong together.

In addition to the "salvation shape" of story, the best narratives have the capacity to tell us who we are and to whom we belong. The identity-shaping power of stories is captured in Jacqueline Baldwin's poem, "Grandfather Mackenzie, Storyteller."

*He told me stories that had great
significance to him
Made them part of my life-weave
Threaded them through the fabric
I was making
From all the mysteries
A child has to solve.*

*Later
When arctic winds blew in
Bringing suffering and pain
It surprised me to find the
stories were
Wrapped around me
In a place where the heart
holds the soul
For safekeeping.³*

Like a piece of fine weaving, stories can bring comfort and warmth. Stories passed down to us enable us to see more clearly who we are and who we might become. Through the telling and receiving of stories—family stories and family of faith stories—we become "storied" ones. Learning both our individual stories and our communal stories offers us insight into our past and present and a picture of our potential. But what does story have to do with spiritual formation? And what kinds of stories are important?

What Kinds of Stories Matter?

At least three kinds of stories are relevant to our spiritual formation. Each forms an important strand of the "life-weave" that enables us to understand God's activity in our lives. Biblical stories provide the curriculum in which our minds and hearts are to be immersed. The curriculum is sweeping, for narrative is the foundational genre of Scripture. The Old Testament is built on a narrative frame, with narrative found in all three Hebrew divisions of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, as well as in the genres of prophecy, wisdom, and poetry. Narrative is also significant in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels and Acts. The central message of the Bible is that God acts in history. No other genre can express this as well as narrative. There is no substitute for the stories of Scripture for the feeding of our hearts and souls.

Our personal stories are also an integral part of spiritual formation. Self-knowledge and understanding are foundational to spiritual formation. Learning to recognize and respond to the activity of God in our lives is one of the central themes of spiritual formation, while assisting another to do the same is one of the primary tasks of spiritual direction. In order to recognize the presence and work of God in our lives, we need to be knowledgeable about the terrain. In Frederick Buechner's words, "If God speaks to us at all other than through such official channels as the Bible and the church, then I think that he speaks to us largely through what happens to us.... His word to each of us is both

recoverable and precious beyond telling. In that sense autobiography becomes a way of praying, and... if it matters at all, matters mostly as a call to prayer."⁴

The third kind of story that is relevant to our spiritual formation is often referred to as the Great Story or the God Story. The biblical stories and our personal stories all need to be placed within the overarching context of this encompassing biblical narrative. The individual stories of Scripture together comprise a larger plot of creation, separation, and redemption. This great narrative gives unity to the whole of Scripture and shapes the identity of the church. The God Story is embedded in a number of places within the worshipping life of the community of faith, particularly in lectionary readings of the church year, in ordinances and sacraments of the community, and, most articulately, in the classical creeds.

A primary task of spiritual formation is to learn to find ourselves narrated into the great God Story. This involves attending to the relationship or the interweaving between the Great Story, biblical stories, and our own personal story. At the intersection of our story and the God Story lies our meeting place with God. God waits to shape us at the place where our story encounters God's Story.

Stories of Separation

Two grand themes of the great God Story emerge from central events of biblical history. In our own spiritual formation, these themes will be encountered over and over as we seek to integrate them into our lives. The first theme may be thought of in terms

of separation. What do we do with the actions that separate us from others? How do we respond to the deeds that cause our bodies to falter? What do we do with the sin in our lives?

These are questions of separation. Central questions throughout the biblical narrative, they speak insistently in the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. It seems impossible to consider the meaning of separation in our own lives without seeking to be addressed by the earliest narrative of separation in Scripture, recorded in the third chapter of Genesis. Pursuing autonomy, Eve separates herself from the Creator. Guilty and fearful, Adam separates himself from both his creator and his partner. Though made for relationship, Adam's words—"I heard...I was afraid...I hid" (Genesis 3:10–11, NRSV)—poignantly reveal the extent of his separation and isolation.

If this story of separation is to have its proper effect on us, we need to see ourselves with Adam and Eve among the trees. We ought to recognize the defenses we so regularly erect to justify ourselves before a God we are not quite sure can be trusted. A primary function of much biblical narrative appears to be to bring us to this point of finding ourselves in this and other stories of Scripture where we might be confronted and met by God. The point of so much of Scripture "seems to be simply to distinguish or 'judge' between two types of readers. Who is broken-hearted? Who is capable of repentance?"⁵ The story of the pair in the Garden is our story. It invites us to examine prayerfully our own points of isolation and separation. The text invites us to allow the narrative to interpret us. Separation has been part of the human story since the

Garden. Seeking transformation for the heart damaged by separation is an important dimension of spiritual formation.

Stories of Transformation

Fortunately, separation never has the last word in spiritual formation. The structure of this essential text of separation makes this clear and is significant to the issue of spiritual formation. The woman's conversations with the serpent and with God bookend the Genesis 3 text (3:1–5, 13). The man's conversations with the woman and with God are enclosed within (3:6–8, 10–12). The good news, however, is that it is not separation that is central to the narrative, but the presence of God. "But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9, NRSV). At the heart of the text, as at the heart of spiritual formation, lies the initiative and activity of God.

Sidney Greidanus says, "More crucial for narrative than for any other genre is the question, What does God here reveal about himself?... In the covenant history narrated in the Bible, the human characters appear not for their own sake but for the sake of showing what God is doing for, with and through them."⁶ God reveals himself in Scripture so that we might know him and, in turn, learn to love and trust him. This text not only tells the story of Adam and Eve, and of our own experience of separation, but also reveals the character of God. At its heart we learn that, even in our separation, God takes the initiative. God comes, and God calls. "The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9 NRSV). Separation cannot be understood apart from

the superseding truth of the gift of God's initiative. In the words of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, "The God of the Bible is the God who comes to people." Much of the work of spiritual formation revolves around issues of separation or alienation, and of learning to recognize the presence and activity of the God who comes.

Formative Questions

Toward this end, I have found three questions to be valuable conversation partners in my reading of Scripture. The first is simply, "How is this narrative my story?" or "How is this *our* story?" Frederick Buechner says, "The Bible is a book finally about ourselves, our own apostasies, our own battles and blessings, and it is the discovery of that that constitutes the real reward."⁷ I have believed this for long enough that whenever I approach a text, I try to live in it with the assumption that this is my story too. Believing that a primary task of spiritual formation is to learn to find ourselves narrated into the great God Story, I look for the point of intersection where my story intersects with God's Story. For example, in the Genesis 3 text I recognize myself in Eve's grasp for independence. I wince at Adam's all-too-familiar attempt to pass the responsibility on to someone else. I marvel at the gentle and persistent ways in which God seeks me out in my rebellion. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel of God, I am unwilling to let go of a story until I know how it is mine.

The second question I find to be a valuable companion emerges out of the first: "What does it mean to live within a text?"

Nicholas Wolterstorff says that one of the ways to live within a text is to attempt to live in conformity to a pattern that is articulated textually. As children, we inhabited the world of stories we were told in such a way that our imaginations were shaped by the stories. We still live story-shaped lives. The issue, says Wolterstorff, is not *whether* we will do so; the issue, rather, is which stories will shape our lives.⁸ Scripture is one of the greatest resources for our spiritual formation and is intended to be the Great Story by which our lives are most profoundly shaped.

The Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri says that "we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives."⁹ I am seeking transformation through replacing the dead-end stories I have acquired with life-giving stories, narratives that contain at their heart the good news of the initiative and activity of God. I am attempting to live by the truths contained in those tales of a God who calls and a God who comes.

The third formative question addresses the way in which we read Scripture. It may be expressed by asking, "How do we read for spiritual formation and not merely for information?" M. Robert Mulholland Jr. addresses this question insightfully in his valuable book *Shaped by the Word*. Reading for information is characterized by an attempt to cover as much text as possible as quickly as possible. It attempts to master the text and is primarily critical and character-

ized by a problem-solving mentality.¹⁰ While there is certainly a place for this type of reading, too often we come to Scripture with a utilitarian approach, in order to "get something for the day" or to deliver a message to others.

In contrast, reading for formation focuses on the quality rather than the quantity of reading. It is characterized by the intention of meeting God in the text. When we are reading for formation, we seek depth. We desire to respond to what we read and to conform our lives to the patterns revealed in the actions and the character of the God we follow and love. We give up our efforts to master the text, and we place ourselves in a posture that remains open to mystery.¹¹ Reading for formation involves a loving, humble sitting with Scripture, characterized by patience and hope.

A Storied Perspective

The Word of God is foundational to our lives together with God. Scripture is Spirit-breathed, and thus it is central to the formation of our own spirits. As we consider our own lives with God and as we walk with others in spiritual companionship, nothing can take the place of the convicting, life-giving Word. It is through the Word that I most clearly recognize my separation from myself and from others, as well as from the Author of the Word. It is through the Word that my eyes are trained to recognize the God who, in the midst of my sin and separation, nevertheless comes to me in love and grace. As we walk together with others on the Way, there is much to be gained from seeking to develop a storied perspective to our spiritual formation.

In a storied perspective, we are invited to see our journey as an opportunity to *do* the story, embodying the truths of the great God Story in our lives and cultivating a life of virtue through cooperation with the work of the Spirit in our lives. Through our lives and our witness, we *share* the story, faithfully narrating to others the story of a God who comes. Through spiritual practices, individually and in community with the faithful, we *learn* the story through regular formative encounters with the biblical text as we read for formation. And, in celebration, we *eat* the story as we share the Eucharist together, thereby becoming absorbed right into the heart of the great God Story.¹² Spiritual formation and story belong together. Together they form the “life-weave” for all who are Storied Ones.

Interview with the Author

DGB: Reading your article reminds me of advice I received long ago from an author whose writing I greatly admired. I asked him how to learn to be a good writer. His answer was simple: “Read good books.” I think of this because I suspect that you have learned your love of stories by reading and hearing lots of good stories. Am I right? What were the roots of your interest in narrative?

BHM: You are right, David. My world is story-shaped. Both my parents were storytellers, and I grew up surrounded by tales of prairie childhood, hard work and large families, a love of learning, and swimming in rivers with cousins. I loved to read, as well, and weekly trips to the local library throughout my childhood intro-

duced me to a world of wonder. The imagination and loyalty of Anne of Green Gables, the friendship and courage of hobbits, and the integrity of Atticus Finch captivated me and showed me ways in which I wanted to live. Elie Wiesel’s comment that “some events do take place but are not true, while others are—although they never occurred” speaks to me of the capacity of narrative to point to truth and to reveal it in ways that are winsome and life-forming.

DGB: I am really interested in the three questions you describe as “valuable conversation partners” when reading Scriptures. And what a wonderfully dynamic way they are to make reading Scriptures into a conversation! But tell me a bit more about how you have learned each of these, and the way in which using them has contributed to your own spiritual formation. Let’s start with the first of them: “How is this narrative my (or our) story?”

BHM: From this story-drenched environment, it seemed to come naturally for me to explore points of connection with what I was reading, and regularly to ask, “How is this narrative my story?” This pattern has been reinforced by my desire to identify the ways in which a particular text addresses me before bringing it to others in preaching or teaching or simply in a conversation with friends. This has made for some interesting discoveries along the way. While preparing a luncheon talk for a gathering of churchwomen on the story of Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4), I approached the text with my standard assumption that this was my story too. It shocked me, after a number of weeks of wandering in and out of the encounter, to be struck by the

realization that this one was not my story. It was as if I had been hit by lightning—this sense that the women I was about to speak to and I might be the last people whose story this was. We were the respectable ones who would have been in our homes, not out sneaking water in the merciless sun. We would have been busy with domestic concerns, feeding children, straightening up the house. Or maybe, because it was noon, we would have just been getting out of church, commenting on the preacher’s sermon or someone else’s unruly kids. We would be the shunners, the righteous ones, our family values offended by loose living, not wanting to expose our daughters and sons to the dubious morals of the many-times-married one.

But, staying with the narrative a little longer, I saw that perhaps, in some way, this was our story after all. All of us gathered at the luncheon longed to be known and loved. All of us shared the same desire for intimacy that propelled the Samaritan woman and some of us in destructive and disastrous directions. We all had known heartbreaking loneliness. Her loneliness was our loneliness. Her thirst was our thirst. The Samaritan’s story was our story too. Discoveries such as this have been my experience more times than not when I approach Scripture with the question, “How is this my story?”

DGB: How about the second question: “What does it mean to live within a text?” How has this been spiritually meaningful to you as you encounter Scriptures?

BHM: Nicholas Wolterstorff says it is possible to live in text in one of three ways: either the story is literally your story, or you are part of a community or family

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as the reason why
God sent Jesus.*

defined by this story, or you are attempting to live in conformity to a pattern that is articulated textually. The issue is not whether we will live story-shaped lives, but, rather, which stories will shape our lives.

One of the ways in which this has been true in my own life is in relation to adoption. As a 4-year-old, I was told by a friend's older sister that I was "adopted, unwanted by my own parents so Mr. and Mrs. Horkoff *had* to have me." Crushed, I tearfully poured this out to my mother. My mother assured me that I was most definitely wanted, and that out of all the babies in the hospital (which took me years to figure out wasn't exactly true!) my father and she had chosen me because they loved me, and it was this little girl's parents who *had* to have *her*. Adoption took on a different meaning for me that day, one that deepens as I learn of the richness of adoption presented throughout Scripture.

Inconceivably, adoption is given as the reason why God sent Jesus. The apostle Paul makes this clear when he tells the Galatians, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as children*. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" (Galatians

4:4–7, NRSV). Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all part of the amazing gift that God calls adoption. Adoption into the family of God paves the way for the reception of the Holy Spirit, and is made possible solely by the coming of Jesus. This is the story and meaning of adoption I want to shape my life. What a rich invitation to live into for us all!

DGB: Your third question—"How can I read for spiritual formation and not merely for information?"—strikes me as particularly important for pastors and others with professional reasons to read Scriptures. But obviously, it is highly relevant for all of us. Tell me a bit more about how this question has made a difference for you.

BHM: Reading for spiritual formation and not just information always causes me to pay attention to my inherent restlessness and my need to resist it. I want to learn from the wisdom of the Benedictines and their vow of stability, their conviction that God is to be found where they are and not somewhere else. There is something here for me to learn in my approach to Scripture, I believe, so I try to exercise my own vow of stability in my reading, staying in one genre, or one book of Scripture, and sometimes even one particular text for considerable lengths of time. Last summer I spent the better part of 3 months in the first eleven verses of 2 Peter, trying to understand what it means to cooperate with the Spirit's interior development of virtue in my life. Through sitting with this text for many weeks, believing that God was present and *enough* in that text, I began to see that Christian spirituality is all about the development of virtue and the presence of gratitude. This text continues to shape my

life in ways that are quiet and formative and, I believe, hopeful.

ENDNOTES

¹ Elie Wiesel. *The Gates of the Forest*, Trans. Frances Frenaye. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) prologue.

² H. Richard Niebuhr. "The Story of Our Life." In *Why Narrative?* eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989) 21.

³ Jacqueline Baldwin. *Threadbare Like Lace*. (Prince George, BC: Caitlin Press, 1997)

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 2-3.

⁵ David L. Jeffrey. "Gnosis, Narrative and the Occasion of Repentance." In *Faith and Narrative*, Ed. Keith E. Yandell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 58.

⁶ Sidney Greidanus. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988) 216–217.

⁷ Buechner, 21.

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Living Within a Text." In *Faith and Narrative*, 212.

⁹ Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*. (London: Phoenix House, 1997) 46, as cited in *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2003) 153.

¹⁰ M. Robert Mulholland Jr. *Shaped by the Word*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000) 51–53.

¹¹ Mulholland, 55–59.

¹² Gordon Lynch and David Willows, *Telling Tales*. Contact Pastoral Monographs, 8 (1998): 32–34.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Horkoff Mutch serves as the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Bentall Professor of Pastoral Studies at Carey Theological College in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has been a pastor, and she loves a good story.