

STORY

**The Power
of Narrative
for Christian
Leaders**

**By
Jay R. Martinson**



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Contents

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| Introduction | 7 |
| SECTION I: The Story of Story | 13 |
| Chapter 1: Story as Leadership | 15 |
| Chapter 2: The Power of Story | 19 |
| Chapter 3: Our Narrative DNA | 27 |
| SECTION II: Knowing My Story and Yours | 37 |
| Chapter 4: The Art of the Before-and-After Story | 39 |
| Chapter 5: Listening to the Backstory | 51 |
| Chapter 6: Detecting Dissonance | 63 |
| SECTION III: Choose Your Destination | 73 |
| Chapter 7: The Identity Story | 75 |
| Chapter 8: The Vision Story | 85 |
| Chapter 9: The Counter Story | 95 |
| Chapter 10: The Challenge Story | 107 |
| Chapter 11: The Change Story | 119 |
| SECTION IV: Telling Stories Well | 131 |
| Chapter 12: Adapt | 133 |
| Chapter 13: Speak to the Heart | 145 |
| Chapter 14: Keep It Real | 157 |
| Chapter 15: Play Small Ball | 167 |
| Chapter 16: Capitalize on Context | 175 |
| Chapter 17: Break Expectations | 183 |
| Chapter 18: Use Sensory Aids | 193 |
| Conclusion | 201 |
| Notes | 205 |

1 Story as Leadership

A traveler made his way along a road. The North Wind and the Sun wagered a challenge: Which of them could make the man remove his coat? In this fable by Aesop, the harder the North Wind blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped his coat around himself. When the Sun shone, however, its warmth inspired the man to remove his coat.

Orders, commands, debate, and forceful arguments are necessary forms of communication. They are also legitimate forms of motivation in particular forms of leadership. They are not, however, typically effective for communicating gospel truths. Like the traveler with his coat, many of us pull our defenses tighter around ourselves when we are pushed. Personal stories, however, tend to engage and draw listeners in. Like the sun, they *inspire* an openness toward change rather than demand it. When it comes to communicating gospel truths, we should be the sun.

My intent with this book is simple. I want to encourage you to use the power of story to lead others in their faith journeys. So it's about story. It's about narrative. It's about communication. It's about evangelism. It's about leadership. But before getting too far, we need some simple definitions.

Story: A factual or fictional account of events. The word *story* becomes interesting when we precede it with adjectives. Tragic story.

Funny story. Fascinating story. My story. Her story. The gospel story. Stories give structure to our human experience. They allow us to understand events that happened in the past; they give us a grammar for understanding what is happening to us right now; and they allow us to plan and choose events we want for our future.

Narrative: The telling or writing of a story. The ways we tell stories, or the events of our lives, are never objective. The telling of our stories reflects how we see the world, ourselves, and others. On what do we focus and elaborate? What do we ignore and minimize? Even our greatest attempts to tell stories objectively are filtered through choices. We are not merely storytellers; we are story editors. Our understanding of reality is in part based on which narratives we accept as true: those we've heard, those we've told, and those we believe about ourselves.

Communication: The process of exchanging ideas among minds through words, symbols, and behaviors, both intentionally and unintentionally. Communication is one of those things that is difficult to define, but we all know when it isn't being done well. Successful communicators realize the complexity of the concept and, like an artist, can choose among the various media available to express a particular thought to a particular person or group.

Evangelism: Intentional actions designed to encourage others toward a stronger relationship with Christ. As such, this includes sharing the gospel with one who has never heard it. It also includes the encouragement for spiritual growth at any point along another's faith journey. It can happen person to person, person to group, or even group to group (as in, a church sending evangelistic messages directed to a community).

Leadership: The intentional act of guiding or influencing others for their well-being. This definition does not consider coercion or manipulation to be leadership, although these things do serve to guide and influence—just not for another's well-being. This definition also does not imply a particular position or title. *Anyone can lead.*



Since you are reading this book, I'm making some assumptions about you. I assume you are interested in encouraging others to a closer

walk with Christ (i.e., evangelism) and are open to finding effective ways of doing so (i.e., communication). Your desire to influence people for their well-being makes you a leader. This book is designed to help you lead, communicate, and evangelize using the power of story—hence, to develop your storied leadership.

Reflect or Discuss

1. How does the fable of the North Wind and the Sun relate to how you prefer to be led? Recall examples of when you've experienced both styles.
2. Given the definition of leadership used in this book, to what degree do you see yourself as a leader?
3. Although most of us have been communicating since before we could walk (or even talk!), why is it that nobody has ever perfected it and misunderstandings remain so common?
4. While the word *evangelism* brings forth a variety of images in our minds, how does the definition this book provides pertain to your own goals?

2 The Power of Story

*“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose,
by any other name would smell as sweet.”*

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Naming

Romeo and Juliet’s love is passionate and real. In today’s language, Romeo would likely call Juliet his soul mate. There’s just one problem, though—their last names. The Montagues and Capulets are warring families, so it is impossible for a Montague son and a Capulet daughter to break ranks from the family feud. In one of the most famous lines from Shakespeare, Juliet ponders the power of naming. *It’s just a name; what’s the big deal?* she seems to demand. The problem is that names and naming are indeed very big deals.

Upon creating the world, God’s first recorded actions involve naming creation. God then empowers Adam to join in this naming process. Significant life changes in the Bible are often marked by name changes. Abram to Abraham. Sarai to Sarah. Jacob to Israel. Simon to Peter. Saul to Paul. We use language to reflect and communicate changes in identity.

Recently a friend excitedly told me that God had provided an enormous answer to prayer: Their physician formally diagnosed their son

SECTION ONE

with Asperger's syndrome. Does this sound like an answered prayer to you? It was for him. Finally he and his wife had a name, a label, a definition for their son's behavioral challenges. Receiving the diagnosis didn't provide a cure, but it did provide perspective. All the random symptoms suddenly made sense and had order. Directions for moving ahead with therapy and treatment were now clear.

Naming, labeling, and definitions don't control events; they give structure to our thoughts. If leadership is guiding or influencing others for their well-being, one powerful way to do so is through naming, labeling, and defining.

The narrative telling of our stories is an act of naming. The stories we tell, and the way we tell them, give definition to our experiences. The details we include—areas of focus and areas of omission—all essentially define that experience. And two people seldom define one experience in the same way. Police reports often demonstrate this truth: Four people witnessing the same crime may offer different descriptions of a criminal's height, clothing, race, getaway car, and actions. These differences exist due to the witnesses' standpoints, perspectives, perceptions, expectations, beliefs, and biases.

My friends Beth and Kevin once returned from winter vacation to find that the pipes in their house had burst, resulting in more than \$100,000 of damage to their historic home. When *I* tell this story, it sounds like a tragedy. Plaster was destroyed, wiring was compromised, every appliance was broken, and layers of ice destroyed hardwood flooring. Their version of the story, however, is different: They got new floors, new plumbing, new appliances, and a new furnace, all paid for by the insurance company.

It is important for leaders to understand that we can have multiple narratives for the same sets of events.

How can I challenge the narrative of a person who sees no hope? How can my church's social media offer a consistent narrative of God's grace changing lives in our community when local news narratives focus largely on despair? How can I use the power of narrative to inspire change and correction? Forgiveness? Hope? Reconciliation? How can I

enter the lives of my children and grandchildren to illustrate a Christ-centered narrative?

The moment we utter words, we are urging people to look at the world in a particular manner. To rhetorician Richard Weaver, this is referred to as the sermonic nature of language. Whether it is intentional, language becomes a vehicle of influence to see and understand life from our own perspectives. Rhetoric—or, the art of using language—always presents us with the opportunity to choose. Whether we choose nobly or otherwise is up to us. Weaver somberly reminds us that, “since all utterance influences us in one or the other of these directions, it is important that the direction be the right one.”¹



I had just gotten my sleeping bag zipped up and my head on the tiny camping pillow. The flickering light of the dying campfire projected it onto the side of our nylon tent. The shadowy image grew larger as it drew closer. Suddenly, claws stabbed into my unprotected dwelling to reveal the glaring eyes—and sharp teeth—of a grizzly bear!

Stories like this have been told for many years as a favorite feature called “This Happened to Me” in *Outdoor Life* magazine. Although we love stories, we especially love true stories. True stories enable us to identify with the protagonists. We experience vicariously what they experience. We can challenge or doubt the credibility of theories and abstract claims, for example, that grizzly bears may slice through a tent. *Says who? How do you know they will?* Firsthand stories contain inherent authority. Ungrounded claims can be questioned. But stories just *are*. Their proof lies in the credibility of the speaker. If we trust the speaker, we believe the story. As Christians, we sometimes worry we won’t have enough knowledge, enough answers, enough evidence. While we should seek to expand our theological knowledge, our strongest proof often lies in our own stories.

Oral Testimony

When John Wesley began to articulate the doctrine of Christian perfection, or sanctification, he did not rely merely upon intellectual reasoning, philosophical syllogisms, or natural laws. Instead, it was through the personal testimonies of religious experience offered by people with whom Wesley came into contact. This “continuing and consistent evidence of experience”² helped him solidify his doctrine. These testimonies were in the form of personal, narrative accounts that essentially communicated, *This is what happened to me*.

Oral testimonies held at least two important functions in the early church (and still do today), the first being faith attainment. John Wesley admitted to Moravian Peter Böhler his uncertainty of preaching until he became certain of his own faith. Böhler told him to “preach faith until you have it.”³ The act of publicly verbalizing his faith to others was presented to Wesley as a faith-creating as well as faith-sustaining act. Phoebe Palmer, an outspoken advocate for the doctrine of sanctification during the nineteenth century, assigned a similar function to testimonies. Since Christ had already provided the means for sanctification, all the seeker had to do was claim the experience. Public testimony served to solidify the experience.

The other function of testimonies involves that of faith maintenance. In accordance with the views of Wesley, Palmer, and later holiness leaders, testimonies shared within the context of small groups have been an important feature of faith maintenance. The oral sharing of individual testimonies, or faith stories, were regular parts of Bible study groups led by John and Charles Wesley at Oxford. At Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness at Palmer’s home, those in attendance were expected to give updates of the spiritual condition of their souls. Revivals (or camp meetings) became a champion for the promotion of the holiness doctrine. Following singing, a sermon, and an altar call, revival services could continue well into the night with the sharing of testimonies. Many contemporary holiness churches maintain a similar emphasis on sharing personal testimonies.

The power of oral testimonies is enormous. They are important for unbelieving listeners who may see themselves in the stories and feel likewise drawn toward the Lord. They are important for storytellers, to ascribe narrative to their experiences: *This is what God did for me*. While testimonies are about the work of the Lord, they also frequently give credit to those who led us toward God in the first place. As such, they encourage all believers to continue reaching out. As an example, Dr. Woody Webb, the vice president of student development at Olivet Nazarene University, offers his testimony:

My growing-up years were spent in the small town of Marion, Illinois, with five brothers and sisters. I was raised in a home where church was never a priority, and my parents worked hard to provide care and keep the family together.

As a young boy, I was often prayed over by a grandmother who was a wonderful Christian example and a charter member of the Church of the Nazarene. On rare occasions, some of my siblings and I attended vacation Bible school or the occasional special program at the local Nazarene church where my grandmother went. Those days ceased following her unexpected death. As far as I knew, my churchgoing days were over.

Little did I know that my grandmother's prayers would be answered about the time I entered the ninth grade. A substitute teacher named Mrs. Lee pulled me aside after class one day and asked me why I had not been to church. As the wife of the new Nazarene pastor, she recalled seeing my name on the Sunday school roll of that tiny Nazarene church. Her invitation and follow-up convinced me to give it another try; after all, how could I say no to a teacher?

One Sunday, then two, then three, and before long it was a habit. It wasn't too many weeks before I knelt at the church altar and Pastor Lee and others prayed with me, and I accepted Christ as my personal Savior.

The months passed, and I continued to grow in my faith. I can't tell you how many pounds of ham and cheese sandwiches I consumed as I sat around Pastor and Mrs. Lee's dining room table

SECTION ONE

most Sunday nights after church. Their example taught me what it meant to serve the Lord.

Over the next few months, I began to sense a call into full-time Christian ministry, and Pastor Lee began to talk to me about preparing for that call at a place called Olivet Nazarene College. In the fall of 1982, I enrolled as a freshman religion major living in Chapman Hall.

My years as a student at Olivet were marked by tremendous spiritual growth. And, by God's grace and the support of others, I completed my master's degree in 1988.

Rev. and Mrs. Lee continued pastoring that church in Marion for many years and had the privilege of leading both my parents into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

I've often wondered, what if I had skipped school that day Mrs. Lee pulled me aside after class? Or what if she hadn't risked pulling me aside at all? Or what if I had ignored her invitation? What if...?

The narrative telling (and retelling) of stories has power. Our narratives name, label, and define the events of our lives. How we choose to tell our stories is sermonic in that language is never value-neutral. When describing any event, we engage in leadership by influencing others. Our narratives influence ourselves and others through what aspects of a story we include and elaborate on as well by what we omit or minimize. Narratives also influence by the rhetorical style, form, and arrangement we artfully employ in their telling. While these principles of power apply to messages within all stories, they are most important to those of us wanting to share the gospel story.

Reflect or Discuss

1. The author suggests that naming has power. How have name choices, name-calling, and name changes proven this to be true in your life?
2. Recall an instance when you heard a story that seemed hard to believe, but your trust in the storyteller was enough proof for its authenticity?
3. How have others' testimonies affected (and how do they continue to affect) your own faith?
4. How have others been affected by your testimony?
5. If you are reluctant to share your testimony, why is that the case?

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