

# Special Strategies for Small Language Groups

## Part I: Re-Thinking Stories

by Karl Franklin

*The author has written a series of modules that have been used in training sessions for selected people from primarily small language groups teaching them to re-tell Bible stories in their language. For a more thorough description of the rationale behind this 'new' paradigm, see the accompanying paper, "Proposing an Alternative Strategy for Small Language Groups in the Pacific," to appear in the next issue of IJFM. The text that follows is the background information from some of the modules, and is only a small part of the entire training package. The materials were tested in Papua New Guinea during 2002-2003.*

### Why Stories?

**A**lthough every society has stories, not every society has them in written form. In addition, thousands of language groups do not have vernacular Bible stories. This is not to say that Bible stories are not told in the languages, but in such cases they are often interpreted or translated from some other dominant language. This section will therefore give some of the rationale for stories, rather than focusing upon translations of Bible stories.

There are many authors who document the value of stories in cultures and societies around the world. There are also numerous books that give clues on how stories can be told effectively and enhanced to help audiences participate in them.

McDonald (1993) reminds us that there is no correct version of a folktale. Rather, there is a myriad of retellings and for this reason every person is a potential storyteller. Stories make us more aware of other groups and cultures and should make us think, giving us messages to apply to our lives. As Rodari (1973:ix) has explained, storytelling should mold schools [and groups in general] into cooperative, imaginative, learning communities, such that the teachers and children engage in exploring reality through their imaginations.

Storytelling involves creative imagination, evoking emotion and spiritual conviction, so careful selection and approach is important. A teacher should be his or her own critic, "developing love and propensity for the art." (Sawyer 1942:35)

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We learn best about people by hearing their stories. “We owe it to each other to respect and learn from our stories.” (Coles 1989:24)

The roots of spiritual and moral values lie in stories, even folk stories or fairy tales, as Murphy (2000) has illustrated from several of the Grimm brothers’ stories.

Spaeth (1996) lists the following as some ways that storytelling may have originated:

- They grew out of playful self-entertainment needs
- They helped to explain the physical world
- They had intrinsic religious need to honor supernatural forces
- They allowed humans the need to communicate their experiences
- They fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, etc.
- They arose out of a desire to record actions and qualities of one’s ancestors

The art and practice of storytelling seems to be as old as mankind. Folk stories have abounded since people first started talking to each other, recounting their experiences. For the teller of the story this was indeed a personal “history,” an account of the “facts” as the person could best remember and tell them. But in order for something to be accepted as a “factual story” it was and still is necessary for someone to corroborate it. It wasn’t enough to believe someone if they alone told the story; other witnesses were needed.

Skip ahead several centuries and consider the “scientific method,” a more elaborate and widely acclaimed method of telling a story. Observations are made about something and then statements are made to account for the nature of whatever is observed and, more precisely, what can be measured. Other observers agree or disagree upon the measurements or observations and the hypothesis is tested by means of argumentation. Certain criteria are established that the examining community agrees to accept, and testing

adheres to the dictates of its own community. Some things, such as folk descriptions of the “rising” and “setting” of the sun are explained in terms of scientific vocabulary or jargon, based upon repeatable observations and measurements. The various parts of the sun and its “actions,” for example, are given names and the person or community, if it wishes to be accepted as scientific, must use those names in the developing discussion. Scientists prize the language they use because it is said to “explain” or “describe” the phenomena better than folk language, like the “rising” and the “setting” of the sun. When the folk language is used, everyone in the scientific community is expected to “know” that the language is imprecise and metaphorical in nature.

In the so-called “post-modern” world even the sacredness of scientific terminology has been questioned. The very notion of truth and its objective nature is up for grabs: what is your truth is my semi-truth or my untruth. This is not very helpful to “science.” Although discoveries in science can be talked about in different ways, there is still the belief (based upon examining and measuring the object) that something really does “exist.” There is matter and there are “laws” that regulate how matter “behaves.” Gravity is a law and so is weightlessness, which seem at first to contradict each other. But the results of both are observable, although the cause may be disputed. One culture may see an apple falling from a tree as an act of a supreme being, not something that just “happens” in response to a law.

The point is that we would need stories to describe the world around us, even if we didn’t believe that something exists. We may not believe that animals talk, but we are willing to hear or read a story in which they do. And when they do, we expect what they say to have some meaning, to be relevant to the theme of the story. So we expect a story to be built around some main idea or argument, with other supporting ideas and arguments. Scientists tell us stories about

gravity and cultural storytellers tell us about their universe. One set of values may be simply to “entertain” through the story, but another may be to “educate” by means of it. To be a story it must have some idea or theme that is central to it. It has to be “going somewhere.”

We can become much more personal about stories: each of us has a story to tell and the story of our lives is the macro-story, made up of as many stories that we can remember and recount. It is memory and imagination that enter into the storyteller’s version, not necessarily facts built on some sort of empirical evidence.

If I tell you an autobiographical story about hunting, it is built upon all of the images in my mind about hunting: primarily these will be from my own experience, but the story will draw upon the experiences of others as well. To be a “good” story it will have to build upon some of the experiences of the hearer as well because the hearer will be forming mental images as he or she hears the story. If parts of my story do not connect very well, the story will be misunderstood or ignored. When I tell my story I introduce scenery, I assume background, and people and animals become a part of it. If you don’t know what a squirrel is, then my story about hunting squirrel will not make the same sense to you that it does to me. You may be used to hunting raccoons, so your ‘coon hunting imagery will interfere or be transposed onto the squirrel-hunting scene. The scenes and scripting for the two will have some parallels, but there will be important and contrastive differences. The insider has the advantage of knowing what is important in order to describe hunting for either a squirrel or a raccoon, but the insider may not be able to give you a very good plan or script for the activity. The insider may assume too much: he (and women hunt too) will think you know what kind of gun is used, or dogs, and when and where the activity takes place. The outsider doesn’t know these things and might prepare a much more elaborate script based on what is asked or researched,

not yet experienced, about the hunting venture.

In addition to what is “real” about the activity—the need for a gun, dogs, a place to hunt, and when the hunt takes place—there may also be “symbolic” dimensions. All the ‘coon hunters may wear coonskin caps, or all the squirrel hunters may wear certain kinds of jackets or boots and carry nuts. The particulars are worked out by the participants: if you want to look the part of an accepted ‘coon hunter, you look and act in the prescribed manner. Scientists and farmers also have their own codes (or non-codes) of dress and speech, often conventionalized to particular “dialects.”

Let’s switch now to examples that might concern us in trying to make the Bible understood to non-experts. (We may simply assume that there is some understanding by the expert exegetes, although it is seldom that simple.) The Bible is full of stories and Jesus turns out to be the best storyteller of all. He is recorded more than any other speaker and he tells more stories than anyone else. Further, his stories are hotly debated right up until this very hour. Every weekend, preachers, priests and rabbis may elaborate his stories to make all kinds of points, even those that are very obscure from the text itself. So how do they do this? First of all they assume that some of what Jesus says is “symbolic,” that is, it is not literal in the sense that Jesus is telling an actual story. Each of the stories may be built on actual first-century life (peasants and Palestine), but the teaching point of the story extends far beyond its application to the literal life and times of Palestine. If it didn’t, we would have little motivation to believe or tell the stories.

Jesus used real objects to refer to principles and themes: the grain, the seed, the weeds, the fields, the nets, the vine and vineyards, the sheep and shepherd. All of these were actual things in the culture. Other things were not: the kingdom of God, Abraham’s bosom, eating flesh and drinking blood, and eating pig’s food were not the everyday experience of

the Palestinians. This is because Jesus was trying to get across a particular principle and the most effective way to do it was to tell a story using culturally relevant objects and stationing them in metaphors. Or, he took culturally difficult events and objects and recast them in terms of metaphors. The difficult concept of entire dependence upon God was, for example, the branches of a vine depending upon the vine and the vinedresser, or a person depending upon sustenance from Jesus himself, not upon ritual enactments of the law or cannibalism.

Think again about some of the



necessary ingredients of a story: a main point, imagination, motivation, style, all involving characters, events and a space-time orientation. Jesus always had a point to make, most often centering on the importance of the kingdom of God and its relationship to individuals. He was motivated to tell this story because he had been sent to the earth to do so by the Father. But he used his imagination and the cultural artifacts at his disposal to tell the stories so that they were convincing. His style was persuasive; it was a story of utmost importance and worth listening to. In fact it was to the peril of the listeners if they did not take heed to the story and change their ways.

In telling a story like Jesus did we should not get tied up in the actual form of the source text. We do not want to miss the main point or points, and we want to ensure that they are made in a way that is culturally explicit and persuasive. That does not mean that the mean-

ing is immediately transparent—that is why Jesus used parables. Parables are simply a kind of story in which certain objects are used to symbolically represent actual or potential situations. In the parable of the sower, the seed represents “the word of God.” It can be used to represent it because some of the family of expressions about seed can apply equally well to the word of God. It can be “planted,” “watered,” “cultivated,” and “harvested,” and it can “grow” and “mature.” We can even “eat” or feed upon it. But there are some things we do with the word of God that we can’t do with seed: we can’t memorize or even hear the seed (although some environmentalists might disagree), we can’t husk it and we shouldn’t cook it. Likewise, there are some things we can do with seed that we don’t think of transferring symbolically to the word of God: fertilizing it, storing it, grinding it, and so on.

When we tell a story we need to be conscious of how such mapping of images and metaphors are done between languages. The whole scene of agriculture enters into a discussion and description of sowing the seed and its maturation. We don’t need to map Palestinian agricultural scenes into the parables in order to learn from them. And it does not follow that the more we can map, the more we can learn and the better the application. A lot of things about agriculture in Jesus’ day are not relevant to the parable, and especially to its meaning. The most important transfer is to know what was salient and crucial to Jesus’ story and how these points are made relevant in the language in which the story is being told.

The gospel story is referred to as the “good news” about God and Jesus. But it is “bad news” if the story is poorly and improperly told, using words, metaphors and comparisons that are misunderstood in their cultural context.

Using storytelling then as a technique and strategy to communicate the Gospel takes us back to the way that Jesus and his disciples did

it. Recording the Gospel message was much later and even then most people who heard the message read to them relied on their own memories to retell the story. Most could not read Scriptures even when they were available.

The situation is the same in many preliterate cultures of the Pacific (and elsewhere). Despite near universal primary education, literateness is a skill that must be nourished regularly. Children don't begin their eating habits with steak; they rely on milk. So it is with the translated message: new literates shouldn't have to begin the reading habits with the Scripture; they should rely on stories. And the stories should sound natural, not like a text imported into a religious setting that is used for the hour (or more) and then rarely heard from again during the rest of the week.

Small languages in the Pacific represent people who communicate orally, not by means of newspapers and books. The viability of the language depends upon the use of it in common situations, representing the most efficient and effective way to communicate. When properly translated, scripture contains a meta-vocabulary that religious practitioners use regularly, often with the same revered sense that scientists have. Storytelling does it without recourse to religious vocabulary, although it may be used, of course. But when it is, some folk explanation is needed immediately, much like a pastor "explaining" that "justification" means "just as if I had never sinned." Key terms will show up in storytelling, but will only be readily understood by the audience as cultural analogies are supplied.

Nevertheless, the tendency is always to introduce meta-vocabulary, borrowing it if necessary from the prestigious language. We may come up with a phrase that tells what an angel is or does, but before long the word will be borrowed from English or (in Papua New Guinea) Tok Pisin.

Storytelling, as Denning (2001) explains, does not replace analyti-

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cal thinking, but it supplements it with new perspectives. Audiences intuitively can leap ahead in their understanding in the story and become involved in the storytelling process. This is not so likely in the case of listening to a passage read or listening to an exegetical sermon. Again, to echo Denning (2001:137, 139), the force of a story is in the telling, where there is interaction between the storyteller and the listeners. People can discuss the story, complain about it, or praise it, but in every sense they are embodying the ideas such that they take the listeners to a new level of understanding.

Given the problems that exist in all cultures, it seems imperative that we understand the stories that we hear. Christians should understand the implications of stories like "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son" for their culture. What is the point of a translation if the main idea of the story is lost and not considered for application?

Storytelling is not the answer to all of life's problems, but it is one avenue to ensure that the problems of life are understood clearly and to understand that God has provided help for them.

### *Telling Stories*

We all enjoy hearing stories told by a good storyteller and, in a real sense, all we have to offer is a good story (Schank 1990). But what makes a storyteller "good" and how does this vary from one culture to another? It is possible to take a story that is of average interest and tell it so that it "comes alive," so that the interest of the audience is held throughout the telling. This happens every week when teachers retell the textbook to the students in a way that helps them to remember the important principles of the lesson.

MacDonald (1993) says that the values of storytelling include the happiness of laughter as the wonders of stories unfold. Stories provide self-discovery, quiet solitude, companionship, building understanding with others, and the power and satisfaction of being creative. Sawyer (1942:26) says that, "The art of storytelling lies within the storyteller, to be searched for, drawn out, made to grow." In addition to the components that MacDonald mentions, Sawyer says that storytelling involves a sense of spiritual conviction. As a folk-art it promotes emotions, imagination and folk-wisdom. The most important component, however, is experience. It includes a love for storytelling, having a pride in telling the story and speaking the story with physical vigor and faith. Sawyer wants no compromise with the trivial and mediocre, no commonplace performances. The storyteller must learn to listen to the voice, control the breath, and choose carefully the words and figures of speech that are used.

Sometimes a story can be made into a poem, dramatized, or sung for more effect. We should remember that we do not know what meaningful impact the interaction with a story will be, but there is much evidence that the importance of a story from a person cannot be underestimated.

Storytelling involves the transfer of imagery (Lipman 1999), with varieties of expression, humor, pauses and rhythm, as well as repetition. "Imagery is the internal representation of actual or fanciful experience." (41)

In writing his stories, C.S. Lewis (see Hooper, ed. 1982) always began with a picture. All of the Narnian books and science fiction books began with Lewis seeing pictures in his head. Lewis gives many valuable comments on stories for children.

Stories from good storytellers should be examined to see what seems to make them effective:

- What cultural knowledge and experiences are assumed in these stories?
- What techniques do storytellers in the culture use?
- What non-verbals (gestures, pauses, loudness or softness of voice, etc.) do good storytellers in the culture use?
- What things in the story might get the listener or reader sidetracked from the main idea, and how might this mistake be avoided?
- What props or other materials might make the story more effective?
- Can the story be adapted as a poem, or song, or dramatization? Would this type of presentation have a more meaningful impact on the listener?

By employing the techniques and principles used by storytellers recognized as “good,” others can learn how to tell a story in such a way that the audience can retain it, and retell the story well.

### *The “Big Idea” in a Story*

Stories are told for a purpose. It may be simply entertainment, but more often it is to get a particular point across. When a central point is expressed at the conclusion of a story, it is often the “moral” of the story, the teaching lesson contained in it. However, as is sometimes the case in parables, the meaning or main lesson of the story may be hidden, or left to be deduced. In other cases, the figures of speech may be explained, as in the parable of the sower. Whatever the case, the storyteller needs to be aware of what the main theme of the story is and how it can best be expressed.

We expect Bible stories to have a lesson behind them, often more than one. They are also part of a larger narrative, which needs to be made clear as well. In the case of folk stories or legends the meaning may be difficult for an outsider to grasp, although an insider may see

the point of the story immediately. If the main idea is clear to insiders, but outsiders do not grasp it, this may mean that the story needs to be recast for the outsider.

When you construct a story of your own we expect you to have some compelling reason for telling it. You therefore need to consider the main ideas of the story and decide if your audience can readily determine them. If not, some adjustment is in order. The novice storyteller needs to listen to or read several different kinds of stories (e.g. a Bible story, a legend or myth, and someone’s personal story) to understand how a storyteller goes



about presenting the ‘big idea’ and how he or she does so most effectively. What clues does the storyteller give to tell you what the main idea is? How does the storyteller introduce the main idea? Is there only one main idea? What are some of the minor (or small) ideas in the story?

Someone who is writing a review (Franklin, 1977) or an abstract must identify the main idea of the book or article. But some pieces may have more than one ‘big idea.’ Consider Wangerin’s (1996) treatment of the Bible as a novel. He divides the Bible into eight parts, or ‘big ideas,’ each with supporting cast and important places:

- The Ancestors
- The Covenant
- The Wars of the Lord
- Kings
- Prophets

- Letters from Exile
- The Yearning
- The Messiah

### *Constructing Stories*

The way in which stories are put together varies from language to language and even from speaker to speaker within a language. However, there are ways to compose stories that make them more acceptable and attractive within any culture. This includes how characters are introduced, what background and supplementary information is included, and how the story develops and is concluded. For example, authors such as Griffith-Jones (2001), demonstrate how different versions of Jesus’ stories accomplish particular purposes.

The same story can be told by different speakers with varying degrees of attraction because non-linguistic features come into play, such as the expressions and gestures used. In this section we are concerned more with the pedagogy that will help the novice learn how to vary the way the content of a story is given, with particular reference to its “Big Idea,” but also how the use of metaphors and other figures of speech aid the story.

A well-constructed story is told in a way that would seem natural to a general audience within the village, and the purpose for telling the story is clear to the audience. The story should include a description of the setting and the characters in the story in a natural way. One of the key factors for judging whether or not a story is “good” is if it can easily be remembered and retold by someone else in a way that will satisfy the original author.

A familiar story can be adapted to different audiences, or the perspective of the storyteller changed from the original. For example, some information that may be well known to every villager may need more explanation when telling the story to someone from outside the culture.

The two volumes edited by McElhanon (1974, 1982) represent a wealth of traditional stories. Those that are told of two brothers, for

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example, could be told by one brother or the other, or by the storyteller (as is the case in the published ones), the brothers could be introduced differently, more cultural information could be provided, and so on. In many cases the stories could be shortened or modified for practice.

Rodari (1973) enthusiastically describes how he helped children in Italy learn how to imagine and tell stories. C.S. Lewis tells how he always started his stories with a picture, with mental images and built or wrote the story around them. We may see, for example, Aslan as the central focus of the Narnia tales, but Lewis explains that Aslan “came bounding in” and tied the stories together.

Questions of this kind may be considered: What is it that holds the theme of “lostness” together in the parables of Matthew 13? If someone replies, “the Kingdom of God,” then what might that answer mean to an average listener in a non-Christian context? What kind of cultural images and metaphors would be appropriate in the cultures of Papua New Guinea to represent the Kingdom of God?

### **Bible Stories**

A story may not be considered a “good” story (from a cultural or vernacular point of view) just because it is a Bible story. We can see this easily if we examine and listen to Bible stories for children. Some authors do an excellent job in conveying the Bible’s principle thoughts through their stories, while other authors do not do as well. Our goal is to have the stories told in such a way that people want to hear them; that people want to listen to the Bible story as much or more than they would want to hear a traditional story. This is not simple. In the West, Christians are more likely to watch a movie on TV than they are to listen to a televangelist tell stories, although some of them tell their sto-

ries very well. Here, and elsewhere, the matter of story evaluation will come into play.

For the re-telling of Bible stories to be effective, storytellers must know how to select the stories, and how to tell them well so they can be retold easily and accurately (see, for example, Steffen 1996). It is especially important to know the differences between Bible stories and other types of stories. Questions such as the following must be answered:

- What information in the story do the listeners already have at their disposal?
- How are the stories told in the source text?
- Who tells them?
- What is the general purpose for the stories?
- For whom are they told?
- In what ways can the stories be enhanced to make them more appropriate for this context?

Bible stories will, hopefully, be the first step in developing an interest in the vernacular, so they should be developed using various tools, such as dramatization, pictures, recordings, and so on. Perhaps in some cases they will lead naturally to requests for videos of Luke or the story of Jesus. However, this will depend upon the interest of the people and the availability of trained vernacular speakers.

Remember, in particular, that good stories begin with images (Lewis, in Hooper ed., 1982), so the storyteller needs a picture or series of pictures in his or her mind before attempting any new adaptation or rendering of the story.

One of the most profound ways that Jesus used to tell stories was with parables. As Yancey tells us (1995:95),

[T]here are no fanciful creatures and sinuous plots in Jesus’ parable; he simply describes the life around him.... The parables served Jesus’

purposes perfectly. Everyone likes a good story, and Jesus’ knack for storytelling held the interest of a mostly illiterate society of farmers and fishermen. Since stories are easier to remember than concepts or outlines, the parables also helped preserve his message. Years later as people reflected on what Jesus had taught, his parables came to mind in vivid detail. **IJFM**

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