

# Foundational Roles of Symbol and Narrative in the (Re)construction of Reality and Relationships

By Tom Steffen

*What provides the foundation for deep-level presuppositions? Scholars have offered multiple possibilities: worldview universals, interests influenced by economics, social relationships, symbols, and narrative. This article attempts to answer this question by exploring the interrelationship between ideas, interests, economics, social relationships, narrative, and symbol. I argue that symbol-based narrative serves as the lifelong, foundational conceptualization agent that allows for the (re)construction of reality and relationships. Shared symbols and stories socialize the personality within the broader communal context; they construct and reconstruct social values and social relations.*

Man is always a storyteller! He lives surrounded by his and others' myths. With them he sees everything in life, no matter what befalls him. And he seeks to live his life as though he were telling it.

—Sartre

One of the best known stories among the Dani in Man Jaya is the race between a snake (a tree python) and a bird (a black-and-white wren). In two variations of the story, man is blamed for the loss of immortality. The essence of one of the stories follows.

When one of the first men died, the people did not know what to do, so they decided to go and ask the snake how it sheds its skin (representing immortality). While following the snake through the forest the cheerful song of a wren distracted them. As they stopped to look up at the wren, the snake slithered away, leaving them without advice. Therefore, the people decided to imitate the decorations of the wren (the Dani decorate themselves for funerals by coating parts of their bodies with white clay); but this failed to reestablish immortality because birds die. This left the Dani devastated and hopeless (Hayward 1997:29).

In this paper I argue that symbol-based narrative (story) serves as the primal foundation of worldview and social structure. Social communities, regardless of size, ethnicity, geographical location, social environment, economic level, or religion, find collective meaning predominantly through shared symbols and stories.

Symbols provide what R. Alan Culpepper calls the "implicit commentary and directional signals" (1983:165) from which narrative takes its cue. I define narrative (storytelling) as a picture in the mind of one person transferred to the minds of others through a full-bodied experience that embraces the mind, the Imagination, the emotions, and volition. My thesis is that symbol and narrative serve as the foundational conceptualization agents that allow for the (re)construction of reality and relationships. They serve as the primary expression of worldview and social structure in that they validate, criticize, comfort, instruct, integrate, structure, stabilize, create, model, entertain, mobilize, and transform their hearers, readers, and/or viewers. As such, there are a number of implications for Christian workers. I will note several.

### **Definitions and Directions**

While we are all born into a symbol- and narrative-dominated world, the Creator does not provide us the opportunity to select a specific social community or the symbols and narratives associated with it. Weather (snow, typhoons, tornadoes, floods, fires) could influence the nature of the narratives, as could geography (mountains, forest, desert, sea), economics (rich, middle-class, poor), politics (liberal, conservative), education (formal, nonformal, informal), medicine (pills, herbs, sacrifices, curses, prayer, touch), psychology (guilt, shame, individual, community), science (evolution, creation), religion (high liturgical, low liturgical, atheism, animism), sports (competition, ethnicity, gender, unions, statistics, winners, losers), interactions with other cultures, and so forth. The framing symbols and stories in one's social environment, for better or for worse define personality within the broader community context. They help socialize an individual by enabling expressions of thoughts, feelings and intentions through culturally-shared symbols and patterns of shared thought. This is what George Howard (1991) calls the "storied nature of all thought."

Now we look to some definitions and directions. Regarding worldview, Charles Kraft argues that "at the core of culture and, therefore, at the very heart of all human life, lies the structuring of the basic assumptions, values, and allegiances in terms of which people interpret and behave. These assumptions, values, and allegiances we call worldview" (1996: 11).

Kraft further notes, "Worldview is not separate-born culture. It is included in culture as the structuring of the deepest-level presuppositions on the basis of which people live their lives" (1996:52). Following Michael Kearny (1984), Kraft expects people to live their lives in relation to the following Worldview universals: classifications, person/group, causality, time, and space (1996:63-65). Similarly, Clifford Geertz defines worldview as people's "picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self

of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order" (1973:127). Lingenfelter (1992, 1996) rejects the notion that worldview is the "center," the deep-level presuppositions by which people live their lives. He argues that people's interests, which stem from economics and social relationships, serve thus purpose. He concludes that people live in accord with their interests, not worldview universals. Lingenfelter sees deep-level presuppositions continuously engaged by social and economic interests. When they are in conflict, people sometimes follow their presuppositions, and at other times, their interests. If discontinuity becomes too great, they, change their worldview (beliefs).

Influenced initially by Mary Douglas (1982,1984) and later by Aaron Wildavsky, Sherwood Lingenfelter prefers to explore cultures and subcultures through the group/grid concept of four human social structures authoritarian, hierarchist, individualist, and egalitarian. Through these four domains (socially-biased games), he moves away from the investigation of ideas of the mind to the more "rich and messy" human aspects of life: property, labor, exchange, family, community, conflict, ritual, and cosmology.

Accepting, for the moment, the above definitions and research methodologies related to social values and social rankings, I will raise two questions that follow naturally. *What must precede Kraft's basic assumptions, values, and allegiances in relation to the universals, or Geertz's picture concepts of nature, self, and society, or Lingenfelter's four social quadrants (authoritarian, hierarchist, individualist, egalitarian) that investigate multiple social environments? What foundational concepts provide the structure for worldview and social structure?*

It must begin with a system of shared symbols that must then be structured in culturally-appropriate and comfortable narrative patterns. The presentation of cold, impersonal, absolute, hard facts in a manner that may be logical, theoretically sound, and systematic to the speaker but alien to the listener will only appear to be stilted, deadening, and sleep-producing. Far too many lawyers, apologists, theologians, pastors, teachers, professors, philosophers, parents, and others rely on such approaches to make their point, believing they are following sound pedagogical methods. What they need instead is a return to the fundamental nature of communication: symbol and narrative.

### **From Symbol to Narrative to Reality and Relationships**

In this section, I will offer an alternative answer to the above questions, one that takes a more relational approach to the lifelong process of (re)constructing worldview and social structure. I begin with the role of symbol, followed by the role of narrative.

### *Role of Symbol*

The foundation of and origin of human behavior is the human ability to create and use symbols. Leslie White argues, "All human behavior consists of, or is dependent upon, the use of symbols. ... All culture (civilization) depends upon the symbol" (1949:22, 33). He defines symbol as "a thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it" (1949:25) White uses the term "thing" because a symbol can take on any physical form: odor, sound, color, taste, objects, and so forth.

Symbols provide the foundation of all human behavior and communication. Geertz (see also Douglas 1982; Turner 1974) argues that culture:

denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (1973:89)

When constructed into systems, symbols become such a part of our underlying assumptions that they are accepted without question and become foundational to what anthropologists call worldview and social structure. Once there exists a shared symbol system, people can begin to ask questions, share experiences, interpret reality and relationships, and tell stories." It is through storytelling that the symbol undergoes refined and revised definition.

### *Role of Narrative*

Narrative is stylized communication patterns of symbols with pictures in the mind transferred to others so that awe and imagination take center stage, accenting cognition and volition. Narrative uses culturally-shared symbols communicated through context-specific schema. How symbol and narrative come together is so fundamental to one's being able to participate in culture that the individual structures perception of reality and relationships.

Symbols, to be truly symbolic culturally, sooner or later find themselves embedded in narrative. For followers of "the Way," the cup and the bread perpetuate symbolic meaning because of two basic narratives—the death and resurrection of Jesus and the Passover. The same is true of facts; to be truly factual, they require a story. Trials are much more than evidence and "convincing facts." They offer story lines developed by lawyers who not only bias their client, but hopefully seem credible to the life stories of the judge or jurors. Convincing lawyers narrate the facts in a logical pattern that fits the mind-set of the judge or jurors.

Theories are much more than abstract constructs; they are, in reality, finely honed stories that represent a particular view of the world. When the theory becomes obsolete, it becomes a discarded story. The same is true for logic and systemization. I appreciate Howard's insight: "Logic or rationality represents a

type of story (or kind of analysis) that one might choose to apply to a particular problem (or situation) in order to understand the issues at stake and discover plans of action that one might entertain" (1991:189). This is why the "germ theory" seems credible to some while the "spirit theory" seems credible to others; or both may make sense to someone else. One (or both) of the theories (stories) may reinforce the broader canon of fundamental stories of a community, lending it legitimacy. This, of course, does not overlook the possibility that people can replace one theory with another. Swapping theories (stories) is a way of life but always comes with a price tag.

Anthropology, as any discipline, has its dumpsite for challenged theories. The first anthropological missiologists, such as Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster, Paul Hiebert, Charles Kraft, Marvin Mayers, Lyman Reed, and Alan Tippett, were influenced strongly by the theory of structural functionalism (Steffen 1997a: 142-143). Today, the limits of this explanatory theory of cultural change and human behavior are more widely recognized and challenged (for the moment) by competing stories, such as conflict theory, cultural materialism (maximizing local resources), or social biology (survival).<sup>2</sup>

Theology, like anthropology, comes in meta-stories, backed by certain "biblical" theories. The meta-stories (sacred stories) of dispensationalism, covenant theology, black theology, Liberation Theology, water buffalo theology, and a host of others serve as the backdrop to interpret those seemingly contradictory verses or to challenge or reconcile outside perspectives (competing stories). The theologies (stories) that have the "ring of truth" tend to be those that reflect the meta-story of the specific theology.

Maier astutely points out the role of narrative in worldview, whether through facts, theories, logic, or systemizations:

Stories are habitations. We live in and through stories. They conjure worlds. We do not know the world other than as story world. Stories inform life. They hold us together and keep us apart. We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are *lived* by the stories of our race and place. It is this enveloping and constituting function of stories that is especially important to sense more fully. We are, each of us, locations where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable. (1988:127)

Due to the pervasive, primal nature of symbol-based narrative in the (reconstruction of perceived reality and competing realities, humans rely heavily, and usually unconsciously, on this genre in numerous ways. Barbara Harding captures the broad-sweeping nature of narrative, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative" (1968:5). David J. Hesselgrave (1997) demonstrates the role of narrative in the origin (what Mircea

Eliade calls *cosmogonie myth*) of different societies. Note also the symbols.

The truth of the matter is that narrative has been the mode by which worldviews have been transmitted and understood by the people of almost all cultures all down through history. Hindus have their stories of Brahmananda and the World Egg. The Chinese have the story of Pan-Ku, the original man whose body parts became the mountains, plains, and rivers of China. The Japanese have the story of Izanagi and Izanami whose playful time on the "bridge of heaven" resulted in the formation of the Japanese archipelago. Naturalistic evolutionists have their story of the rise of life from the primordial mists of aeons past. (1997:28)

Narrative is much more than an art form, entertainment, or literary genre; it is a way to structure thought (Bradt 1997). We are not only what we eat; we are also what we "symbol" and "story."

#### *Narrative as Author*

Narratives transmit worldview and social structure from one generation to the next; they author people. A person's micronarrative, influenced greatly by the community's and/or subculture's macronarrative, defines acceptable ideas and establishes relational boundaries.

Referencing traditional societies, Stephen Crites (1971) argues two types of stories exist, the sacred and the mundane. He defines sacred stories as those that orient a people to the great powers and establish reality, while mundane stories include those told to make sense of the world. Crites goes on to note that *all* mundane stories take their cue from the sacred stories. Whether in traditional or postmodern societies, narratives provide the templates that represent and organize identity, memory, and community (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997). A core of canonical stories develops to separate one person from another (I-you) and one group from another (we-them). We can thank the structural functionalists (Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Kluckhohn) for this contribution, but we must move beyond them.

#### *Narrative as Authored*

While narratives author people, it should be quickly pointed out that people author narratives. Many of us have played the game where a simple statement is passed from one person to the next in a group. When the last person tells the group the statement, it is often unrecognizable to those who first told it. The same type of evolution can take place with narratives.

Michelle Rosaldo captures the move in anthropology away from structuralism (that is, the hard wiring of individuals that causes them to respond in robot-like, prescribed ways) to a more interactive response:

Culture so construed is ... a matter less of artifacts and propositions, rules, schematic programs, or beliefs, than of associative chains and images that tell what can be reasonably linked up with what; we come to know it through collective stories that suggest the nature of coherence, probability, and sense within the actor's world. Culture is, then, always richer than the traits recorded in the ethnographer's accounts because its truth resides not in explicit formulations of the rituals of daily life but in the daily practices of persons who in acting take for granted an account of who they are and how to understand their fellow's moves. (1984:140)

Edward M. Bruner (1984) would concur, noting that whenever a story is told, a dialogic relationship exists between self and society. Reality is always negotiated on all societal levels (see Rosen 1984), primarily through symbol-based narrative.

The very nature of narrative should help us appreciate its authored nature. Narrative, like symbol, is messy; it complicates the simple; it teases and surprises; and it is subjective, spontaneous, ambiguous, immediate, boundaryless, contradictory, changeable, and tentative. It concedes ignorance; it remains open-ended; and it is humble. Narrative is open to inexhaustible interpretations of truth (and prizes it). All of these qualities promote dissonance in transfer from the speaker to the hearer, from the writer to the reader, and from the screen to the viewer. While it is true that ethnonarratives influence egonarratives, it is also true, due to the messy nature of narrative and choice, that egonarratives influence ethnonarratives.

Narratives are always co-authored (MacIntyre 1981), therefore leaving what Kraft (1979:69) calls "room to wiggle" or what Victor Turner calls "freedom to juggle" (1967:106). People, influenced by subcultures and experience, differently interpret the roles of characters (and choices made) depicted in narratives. To illustrate, some interpret Mark Twain's (1946) characters in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as promoters of racism, while others do not. The Sawi believed Judas rather than Jesus to be the hero (Richardson 1974:177). The Africans, at a translation conference with Jacob Loewen, believed the main point of the story of Joseph was that no matter how far Joseph ventured from home, he never forgot his family; Westerners thought it related to fleeing sexual temptation (Loewen 1974:8). Some see Eve as independent, assertive, decisive, and intelligent, while others see her as gullible and possibly stupid. To help facilitate the Christian workers' understanding of symbol-based narratives as author and authored and their implications for ministry, an integrative model is needed.

## A Model for Investigating Reality and Relationships

Figure 1 depicts my developing understanding of the dual role of symbol and narrative in relation to the (re)construction of reality and relationships. It begins with the environment's influence on symbol, moves to narrative, then to worldview and social structure, ending in expressed behavior and ritual. The surface-structure behavioral expressions continue to undergo reconstruction as the cultural players negotiate the deep-level concepts of symbol and narrative. Before discussing the model in detail, I will tell the story behind the model and then identify seven underlying assumptions.

### *The Story Behind the Model*

I would be remiss not to tell the story behind this developing model. The Ifugao of the Philippines must receive credit for reintroducing me to another way of learning—narrative. They challenged my take-it-for-granted understanding of the way people learn, forcing me to reconsider the "story" I had accepted.

We tend to teach as we were taught. I was no different. The teaching I received focused heavily on the cognitive, presented in a logical manner—at least to me. The only problem was the Ifugao did not find my logic or emphasis on the cognitive either appealing or logical. They did not appreciate the mental gymnastics they had to do to follow my teaching. The gospel message was lost due to a pedagogical form rather than their hardness to truth. I had two basic choices: keep on with what I was doing and distance my hearers, or become a learner and change. I chose the latter. That decision began a journey like that of Abraham's, at least from one perspective. I have no idea where it will lead me, but the uncharted journey has begun.

### [Figure 1. here]

How could I have missed it? It seemed so obvious: the Ifugao learn basically through stories. From pre-birth to post-death, stories play the predominate socialization role among the Ifugao (Steffen 1997). This flew directly in the face of the learning theory (story) I had bought into. After all, stories are for entertainment, they're for children and adults. Certainly, stories do not teach theology (Steffen 1996:105-117). My formal educators rewarded abstract thinking and ideas, certainly not stories. Two contradictory stories now fought for supremacy in my mind.

I bought into the narrative story, but not completely. I simply added narratives to my linear lessons. The Ifugao considered this a good first step, but insufficient. More negotiation took place as I argued internally the pros and cons of story, influenced now by the chronological teaching model, a seven-phase, narrative presentation of biblical theology designed for evangelism and follow-up (see McIlwain 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992).<sup>3</sup> I began experimenting with the use of narratives alone, relying on the discussion that followed for feedback. Now I was

getting somewhere. Not only could the Ifugao grasp my message, they were able to communicate it to others effectively. I learned an important lesson through all this. An effective cross-cultural storyteller does not *begin* by telling stories because two foundational roles must precede storytelling: the role of story analysis (learning how the target audience tells stories) and the role of story smith (designing challenging contextual stories) (Steffen 1996:94).

My narrative journey continued after our ministry among the Ifugao. My experience with many illiterate Ifugao made me wonder how literacy may have short-circuited the role of narrative for literates. I began to wonder about the percentage of narrative found in the Bible and the sacred texts of other religions. I pondered why so many seminaries require numerous courses in systematic theology, but give little attention to biblical theology, and virtually overlook narrative theology. I questioned why we are taught in homiletics courses that story is used basically to illustrate the three points of a sermon rather than to be the point of the sermon. My research showed the use of narratives in multiple disciplines: anthropology, psychology, organizations, medicine, apologetics, and history (Steffen 1997b). Would the church be the last to jump on board? To promote this powerful genre on which God and Jesus so heavily relied, I began teaching a course at Biola University entitled "Narrative as an Educational Methodology." That course brings us to this article and the present questions for which I seek answers. Does symbol-based narrative stand behind the various theories and theologies, (re)constructing reality and relationships through individual and communal negotiation? What role does symbol-based narrative play in (re)constructing worldview and social structure?

#### *Model Assumptions*

My first assumption addresses symbol. *Because God uses symbol to convey truth, people follow Gods example, using symbol to summarize, substantiate, and elaborate life as they perceive it.* Symbol, through the creative nature of people, serves as the basic unit of all human behavior and relationships. Symbol also serves as the basis for communication from which narrative takes its cues.

The second assumption sets the stage for all those that follow—*God is a storyteller.* With 60-75 percent of the Bible cast in the narrative game, it becomes obvious God is a storyteller (Steffen 1996). The predominant game of Scripture is narrative because God loves to tell stories.

Assumption three is closely tied to the first, *God is a risk taker.* Recall the messy nature of symbol and narrative and the freedom to interpret it noted above. It becomes quite obvious that those who wish to deal in symbols and narratives are willing to risk misinterpretation. God as Symboler and Storyteller seems more interested in the recipient's journey to truth than the immediate articulation of the right answers. He seems more interested in building a frame of reference, continuing a conversation, and developing an ongoing relationship than immediate cognition and conclusions. God seems more interested in

empowering than being empowered (Bradt 1997).

The fourth assumption expands the third collectively: *cultures and subcultures, like God, take risks in the use of and reliance upon symbol and narrative*. As discussed earlier, while stories author people, people also author stories. There will probably never be 100 percent transfer of a symbol-based narrative in that all stories are co-authored. Social entities that wish to remain relevant, however, will rejoice rather than react to the critical contextualization of canonical narratives. These agents recognize the need for culture creators, not just culture consumers (J. Bruner 1986).

Because God is a storyteller, a fifth assumption emerges: *people are "story-telling animal."* (MacIntyre 1981:206). Humans are unique in that of all created animals, only they tell stories. No matter one's ethnicity, generation, gender, occupation, status, or role, symbol-based stories play a major role in daily activities and decisions. People not only tell old and current stories, they create new ones, all because of their Creator's penchant for story.

Assumption six purports *stories are political (biased) in nature, thereby causing people to separate into distinct cultures, subcultures, and networks*. When listening to narratives, people identify through experiential analogy with those beliefs and behaviors of characters that "indicate survival or success." This results in in-groups and out-groups.

Examples of group identity in American society include non-gang members trying to grasp the "destructive" nature of membership (jump-ins, sex-ins) and daily life (drive-bys, walk-bys, drugs, taggers, turf); American boomers and busters discussing life or selecting music for a party; Asian parents born overseas trying to guide their American-born children; advocates of dispensationalism having their meta-story challenged by covenant theologians; structural functionalists having their theory (story) challenged by conflict theorists (storytellers); Heaven's Gate cult members revealing to nonmembers their heavenly journey goals on a video made prior to their suicides. Narrative defines and determines relationships.

Walter Fisher says, *"There is no story that is not embedded in other stories"* (1997:316). The seventh assumption reminds those of us primarily from the West that the individual has inseparable ties to community. It reminds those who emphasize community that self also is important. The interconnectedness of narratives emphasizes the interconnectedness of person and people, of private and public. Jerome Bruner adds:

stories define the range of canonical characters, the settings in which they operate, the actions that are permissible and comprehensible. And thereby they provide, so to speak, a map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, thought, and

self-definition are permissible (or desirable). As we enter more actively into the life of a culture around us, as Victor Turner remarks, we come increasingly to play parts defined by the "dramas" of that culture. (1986:67)

*While stories remain open to multiple interpretations, it is still possible to know God (upper case) (Reality, Truth) sufficiently.* While understanding of God is always lower case (reality, truth), it remains possible to have an ongoing relationship with Reality/Truth.

### *Model Overview*

Let us now consider the various integral components of this model.

*Environment.* The environment (including ecology and culture) determine the need for and type of symbols, which in turn affect the manner in which we think and relate. How individuals and communities view the environment will influence the content and interpretation of stories told, heard, and viewed. Those coming from a rural, pastoral background tend to prefer symbols that depict that environment. They may refer to: animals to depict beauty, as evident in the Song of Solomon; geography to depict emotions ("Valley of Death"); smoke (incense) to depict communication with the spirit world; and a "Rock" to define an unseen God. Those coming from a technological environment tend to prefer different symbols. For information they "surf the web" on the "information highway" to find out what's happening in our "global village." Emotionally, they "go into orbit" or become "lost in space." Religiously, they may define God as a computer. The environment influences the creation and interpretation of all symbols, which, of course, influences the narratives that communicate them.

*Variations of narratives.* As symbols address all areas of life, so also do narratives. Variations of narratives exist to cover the complexity of life, often with deep overlap. Myths, legends, folk tales, and epic songs provide the basis for individual and collective identification. Biographies, autobiographies, history, and gossip depict heroes, heroines, and rogues, conveying culturally acceptable aspirations. Parables, proverbs, poetry, epic songs, and riddles offer wisdom. All variations of narrative, whether identification, wisdom, or aspiration, may involve socialization and entertainment. It should be noted that traditional recitations may vary from those influenced by the integration of other cultures.

*Venues for narratives.* Narratives speak through at least four venues: verbal, written, visual, and acted. People hear verbal narratives long before the words are understood, although intonation, voice level, and volume begin to define expected behavior and roles. From pre-birth through death, verbal narratives through speech and song discourage, deceive, destroy, encourage, challenge, inspire, stimulate, champion, and transform our beliefs, behaviors, and relationships.

Due to the fact that verbal narratives rely on memory, over time, they tend to change or become lost. Memory also limits the number of narratives one can remember chronologically as well as the type of analysis that can be conducted. Nevertheless, orality allows narrators to reconstruct stories creatively as they interact with cues given by a live audience.

Written narratives, on the other hand, do not suffer from memory loss, low chronologies, or extensive analysis. The written text, now frozen in time, allows for fixed texts, limitless chronologies, and generational analysis. They encourage private interaction with a distant, often unknown authors. Bookstores and libraries ensure that the thoughts and ideas of characters (human, animal, fictional, and spiritual) are not lost or changed over time.

Visual narratives represent stories cast in art form (graphic symbolic imagery). They may be pictures portrayed in cathedrals' stained glass windows that depict Bible stories, public statues that portray famous political or religious figures, or the architectural design of a building. They may be symbols such as a flag, a decal, a loaf of bread, a withered fig tree, and a staff. They may be ceremonial rituals celebrated at prescribed times. Visual narratives cry out the stories of the artists who create them; and observers interpret them within their social and historical contexts. A change of government may result in these works being destroyed (kill the symbol and the story), but in every case, they will have to institute new works of art (cast a new symbol and story).

Visual narratives, like all narratives, come with risks and rewards. Whenever symbolic narrative is involved, reinterpretation is never far behind. The brazen serpent, depicting the story of repentance, forgiveness, love, and salvation, soon gave way to the story of idolatry (Numbers 21:4-9; 2 Kings 18:4).

Acted narratives are dramas (verbal, wordless) presented on the silver screen, the stage, or in sleep. Characters (human, animal, puppets, and cartoon) act out archetypal roles of acceptable and unacceptable conduct, often dealing in the sensitive areas of triumphs, tragedies, traditions, and transitions. In live settings, the actors can play off the audience and vice versa. This type of narrative, possibly more than any other, allows the actor to experience the life of the character he or she depicts. Learning, therefore, takes place beyond the audience. Those acted narratives considered to be foundational to reality and relationships are eventually played out in the public arena through rituals (see Doty 1986; Zahniser 1997).

*Versions of narratives.* At least three versions of narratives emerge from the above four venues: official, street, and competing. The "official" narratives are the "narratives of power." These stories represent the mental libraries of canonical stories developed over time to promote cultural (national, city, institutional, and small group) ideals and boundaries. Societal guardians on each level tell such stories in the court-room, over the pulpit, across the dinner table, in the

classroom, on the sideline of a sports arena, or on a leisurely walk. These stories encapsulate the community's idealized beliefs, behaviors, and relationships.

Official narratives help people maintain some sense of group unity and cohesion. To illustrate, in the business world, the organizational flow chart serves as the "official" company story of the status and role of management and labor. Lines link superiors to subordinates, depicting rank, prestige, and pay. Reality, in relation to the connected lines, however, is often quite different when it comes to how things really get done. While the lines remain intact on the "official" organizational chart, new lines would be required to depict the "unofficial" stories (street stories) that really move (or detour) the company.

"Street stories" are those narratives that represent present reality in the micro-context. They portray the real world where the "rubber meets the road," always maintaining a vigilant eye for any "official" stories that may challenge their perception of reality. In relation to the organizational flow chart, street stories represent the multiple informal networks that discuss, decide, and implement daily work activities. Whether these networks champion or contradict the "official" authority lines, they never show up on the company's "official" organizational flow chart. There is a sense in which all stories compete against each other. Here I will narrow the definition of "competing narratives" to refer to those stories that stand in opposition to the official or street stories. Insiders and outsiders use these narratives to challenge the status quo, opening the door of suspicion. Proponents of official or street stories may define competing narratives in derogatory terms (casting political stories, jokes), hoping to minimize the influence upon their followers. These terms may include: "irrational," "unrealistic," "myopic," "simplistic," and "myths." They may also attempt to debunk the narrators who champion competing narratives, labeling them "backward," "primitive," "blasphemous," "outdated," "superstitious," "the religious right," "liberals," and "racist." Those followers who buy into competing narratives may hear terms such as "deviants," "false teachers," "criminals," "radicals," "activists," "rebels," "antagonists," "agitators," "blasphemers," "insurgents," "extremists," "guerrillas," "opponents," and "counter-community." All competing stories require some type of damage control.

### *Worldview and Social Structure*

The (re)construction of social reality and social relationships continues on a daily basis as official, street, and other competing stories collide. Values, beliefs, interests, unifying and opposing themes, status, and role, all undergo continuous modification or even total replacement, in some cases. Rituals (enacted dramas) that provide meaning to people throughout their life cycle, during times of crisis or national celebrations, serve as re-enforcers of "tradition" for self and society.

But at the bottom of all this lays a malleable, symbol-based, narrative foundation. Symbols and canonic narratives inform values, beliefs, interests, unifying and opposing themes, status and role, behavior, and ritual. Meta-stories interpret

philosophy, science, theology, anthropology, psychology—yes, every discipline. Yet these narratives remain ever-changing, providing momentary templates that define life. Symbol-based narrative *privileges* worldview and social structure.

## **Implications for Mission Practice**

The above discussion should encourage Christian workers to become adept researchers of narratives, identifying and analyzing those pivotal symbols and narratives that relate to reality and relationships. Since people experience their lives through symbol-based narratives, it only seems wise to investigate them.

Studying the symbol-based narratives of others must move beyond the library and the computer. While these sources may be good starting points, they will not be helpful in deciding which are official stories, street stories, or other competing stories. This requires: meeting people on their own turf; participant observation, interacting with many people from different generations and genders; and collecting numerous life stories and life histories. From these sources, researchers should be able to isolate key symbols, and discern the version of the story heard and the venue of preference. Wise Christian workers will move from "story analysts" to "story-smiths" to "storytellers," investigating symbol and story from three perspectives: the target audience, the personal perspective, and the biblical perspective. Below, I briefly note six areas that should receive in-depth investigation.

1. *Determine which narrative variations a culture prefers.* Not all cultures use every variety of narrative. The Ifugao, for example, often use epic song to publicly convey history (identification), to identify cultural heroes (aspirations), and to provide entertainment and encourage participation (socialization). Further investigation would alert the story analyst to the Ifugao's penchant for proverbs (wisdom). Once identified, the story analyst will have discovered not only preference, but also a stylized communication strategy for presenting the gospel. A key question remains: will the Christian worker feel comfortable using something unfamiliar, yet comfortable to the hearers/viewers, such as drama, dance, and puppets?

2. *Identify the key cultural symbols.* Just as the variety of narratives used differs from culture to culture, so do the symbols. Black does not always represent evil; white does not always convey purity. Rabbits, ducks, and bears appreciated by some cultures may be replaced by snakes, eagles, and panthers in other cultures. How does the story analyst know if he or she has identified a key symbol? Ortner's criteria are helpful. She believes key symbols will be signaled by more than one of these indicators:

(1) The natives tell us that X is culturally important.

(2) The natives seem positively or negatively aroused about X, rather than indifferent.

- (3) X comes up in many different contexts.... (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.).
- (4) There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X.
- (5) There are greater cultural restrictions surrounding X, either in sheer number of rules, or severity of sanctions regarding its misuse. (1973:1339)

It would be helpful to note the length of history that surrounds the symbol. The age of a symbol could indicate the pace of cultural change. Key questions for this area are: How long has this symbol existed? How do their symbols differ from mine, or from those found in the Bible?

3. *Identify the story schema.* Shore (1996) reminds us of the necessity to identify the foundational schemata in which people prefer to present stories. Such schema legitimizes the story, thereby opening the door for recognition and responsible reproduction. To illustrate, Frost (1977) notes that many of the stories of the Bemba of Zambia follow a journey pattern. The journey begins at home, moves through a hostile environment (formerly a forest, presently an urban setting) and then returns home. This pattern of reality and relationships made sense to the Bemba in the past and now, with adaptation, in the present. An adapted past provides present consistency and coherence. Some key questions to ask are: How would telling your faith (testimony) have to change if this schema were followed? Which Bible stories follow this schema? What other schemata do you recognize? How has schema influenced our interpretation of Scripture?

4. *Analyze the stories in relation to reality and relationships.* Narrative (reconstructs reality through distinguishing categorizations (good and evil, real and unreal, knowable and unknowable), causations (naturalism, spiritism, fatalism, magic, theism), time (linear, circular, human, clock), space (geographic, social), and social values (ethics, morals). How do the official stories define these areas? Street stories; Competing stories?

The same is true of interests. Stories relate interests to economics and social relationships. How do the stories define status and role (social ranking); separate self from society; and define kinship, marriage, and in-groups from out-groups? How do they resolve conflict? What are the official stories surrounding interests; street stories; and competing stories? Ortner's (1973) criteria for symbol should also prove helpful when summarizing the unifying and opposing themes that connect reality and relationships.

5. *Identify the narrative-ritual connection.* Foundational narratives must not only be told verbally, they must also be enacted visually through ritual.<sup>4</sup> These rituals may range from elaborate public ceremonies to simple private celebrations. Whether elaborate or simple, behind every ritual stands symbol-based narrative(s). Story analysts will therefore want to discover the background narrative(s) by answering at least these questions: How is status and role

depicted in the ritual? What values, themes, and beliefs does the ritual privilege? What are the stories associated with the symbols or paraphernalia used in the ritual? What are the official stories that surround the ritual, street stories and competing stories?

6. *Craft Gods competing story in a contextualized manner* Once the Christian worker has a good grasp of the symbol-based narratives that (re)construct the world-view and social structure of the target audience, as well as his or her own (no one is without symbols, schemata, or stories), and those found in Scripture, it is time to take up the story smith role. This begins with the selection and contextualization of competing stories.

For an audience to change foundational narratives, a strong, recognizable, competing story must take its place. The gospel serves this role in that it challenges those foundational symbols and narratives that the target audience has substituted. The gospel's comprehensive themes will address all areas of life (environment, world-view, and social structure), demanding total allegiance. The Christian worker should therefore expect negotiation, provide contextualization without compromise, and recognize that following Christ is a lifelong journey.

The Christian worker can help smith the gospel by selecting those stories from society (global and local) and Scripture that provide sufficient background information, lay out the basic themes of the gospel, yet connect to their foundational symbols and narratives. Prior studies would have alerted the Christian worker to the possible misinterpretations the listeners or viewers may give the stories or schemata, which may already match existing competing stories and the venue(s) of preference. The Christian worker is now ready for the third role—that of storyteller.

## **Conclusion**

I conclude with Paul Bohannan's direction-setting questions, "But the mainstream of cultural anthropology is only just beginning to ask: How do we use stories? How do other people use stories?... Does such a concern with story take us the next step beyond fieldwork?" (1995:151, 150). Will the study of foundational narratives (the symbol-based stories behind the stories), in contrast to worldview and social structure studies which tend to answer the more descriptive "what" question, move the Christian worker closer to answering the "why" question? I believe so. To illustrate, I return to the Dani's story surrounding immortality (noted in the introduction).

As the Christian worker documents the Dani's immortality story, the preferred street version will emerge. From the preferred street story, symbols influenced by the environment can be identified. The shed skin of the snake represents immortality—the immortality lost because the first people were distracted by the black-and-white wren. The white clay that covers parts of their bodies during funerals today, as well as the feathers that adorn their heads, symbolize a

destroyed hope from the past.

The wren that the Dani substituted for immortality resulted in continual death for the Dani.

From this story a schema emerges, one similar to the stories of the Bemba of Zambia. It begins with a disaster, the death of the first man. A journey ensues as the living seek a solution for mortality from the snake that is able to shed its skin year after year. The wren short-circuits the journey as the Dani find themselves fascinated by the bird's melodic chirping. The story ends with the Dani returning home with-out a solution for mortality. The Christian worker could not attempt to verify the schema presented in this story (disaster, a risky journey into the unknown, or a return home) by comparing it to other Dani stories.

The snake-and-wren story provides strategic data in relation to reality and relationships. As for reality, death remains a great fear for the Dani as they have yet to find a solution for immortality. The story also suggests that reptiles and animals can provide life instruction for humans. In reference to relationships, the story suggests that people can be misled, thereby destroying the hope of others for generations to come. It also suggests that traditional status and role divisions disappear. Mortality levels the playing field because everyone dies.

Present ritual reinforces a story that occurred long ago. The white clay smeared on parts of the body during funerals continues to restate and reinforce the old story, reminding participants that immortality remains elusive. The same holds true as participants imitate bird behavior by keening a mournful sound during funerals.

Based on the above research, the Christian worker can now select and contextualize competing symbols and stories from Scripture, God's sacred Storybook. Hayward (1997:29) notes that the missionaries working among the Dani eventually incorporated the Dani's "keen sense of loss . . . into their retelling of the Christian promises of eternal life." This direction was not without difficulty in that never dying differs from eternal life after death.

Origin stories and symbols from Genesis help provide connective and corrective instruction. Symbol-based stories, such as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the tower of Babel provide bridges and identify barriers to Dani stories in that they feature a God who seeks personal/communal relationships, group unity, a serpent, murder with long-term consequences for humanity, dispersion, and loss of immortality. And they move beyond Dani stories and symbols by offering supernatural hope through sacrifice and clothing provided by a caring God (Hayward 1997:39). In the Dani case, symbols and narratives from the Bible reconstruct reality and relationships for many.

## Notes

1. Assume that language is the communication mode that serves narrative by revealing and hiding reality and relationships (e.g., masculine terms for humankind).
2. One wonders if theories are always as contradictory or competing as their authors imply. Could some theories be complementary, zeroing in on a specific aspect of culture that other theories do not address? Beside a graveyard for "outdated" theories, perhaps a hospital that can perform synthesis theory surgery could prove healing.
3. See chapter 11 of my *Passing the Baton: Church Planting That Empowers* (1997a) for a critique of McIlwain's chronological teaching model.
4. In *Symbol and Ceremony*, Zahniser (1997) astutely recognizes that fulfilling the Great Commission requires more than cognitive teaching; making disciples also requires symbolic ceremonies.



