

Storied Curriculum: Power in Our Lives

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Every day in our Adventist classrooms, our children “experience” stories. Stories are engaging teaching tools. Story lines are much easier to follow and remember than scattered pearls of wisdom stitched together in philosophical language. It’s small wonder that Jesus, the Master Teacher, used stories at every opportunity.



Why is the narrative so powerful? McIntyre, a moral philosopher, says it’s because mankind is essentially a story-telling animal. In other words, we are just programmed that way, and we can see that in our own social circles. I enjoyed the good fortune of growing up in a story-telling family. While I doubt that any ethnicity has the corner on narrative sharing, the Irish are as good as any when it comes to exchanging words. My ancestry includes villains and heroes, all wrapped up in stories that have been handed down through generations of time, undoubtedly with some embellishment. And let’s be honest. Everybody loves a good story because stories encourage and strengthen us, as well as give us hope for the journey we know as life.

Every child in an Adventist school has heard Bible stories repeatedly by eighth grade graduation . . . stories of disobedience and hope, of courage and fear, of greed and generosity, of wise decisions and poor choices. Each story is great reinforcement against making inadvisable life moves. Stories can be recalled at critical points in our lives. Ellen White, for example, states that in his terror at being taken as a slave to Egypt, 17-year-old Joseph remembered the stories his father Jacob had told him – stories about running away from Esau’s wrath and from the only home he had ever known due to his deception, about the vision of the ladder leading up to heaven, about the promise the God of Jacob’s fathers had made to him, and how they had been fulfilled. Although filled with inconsolable grief, it was largely these stories of God’s care over his forefathers in foreign and hostile lands that “saved the day” for Joseph. Mrs. White says, “Joseph believed that the God of his fathers would be his God. He then and there gave himself fully to the Lord, and he prayed that the Keeper of Israel would be with him in the land of exile.” (p. 214)

As children of a God who refers to Himself as “the Word,” it is no accident that words have such meaning and power for us. Every story that is shared, every development of an experience into articulated expression, is a creative act in itself, reflecting a God who used words to speak the world into existence.

We share stories not just to entertain, but to help us make sense of our lives. In stories we should see lessons for ourselves as educators and administrators because these are powerful teaching tools. In his book *32 Third Graders and One Class Bunny: Life Lessons from Teaching*, author Phillip Done shares a collection of powerful stories from his own elementary classroom. In some he is the hero; in others, he is not. But in each one he has learned or confirmed a valuable life lesson. In one of my favourite stories he tells of Ronny, a struggling reader, whose reading log is returned to school each day unsigned by his mother. Done is not happy about this apparent parental irresponsibility and sends home articles for Ronny’s mom to read so that she can be more helpful. There is still no response. Levelled books are sent home for nightly practice, but come back unread. Excuses are made, but nothing ever changes. Ronny’s mother is always “busy” and “has other things to do,” according to her son Ronny, who is falling ever further behind in reading. Finally, the excuse becomes,

“She’s taking night classes,” and Done is livid because he’s certain she’s taking a fluff class and ignoring her offspring at home who really needs her help with reading.

A few nights later Done is helping with adult registration at his school, and Ronny’s mom comes in to register. She “can’t find her glasses” and needs help with filling out registration forms. As she walks away, he recognizes – belatedly – that she has just signed up for Beginning Reading. Done is overwhelmed by his presumptuousness, of his setting up Ronny to have to make excuses for his mother, of embarrassing him and making him feel bad. Crushed, Done wonders how he could ever call himself a teacher.

Fortunately, the story doesn’t end there. A short time later, Done calls Ronny’s mother in for a conference. He apologizes for not being more perceptive and for jumping to conclusions. But Ronny’s mother pulls one of Ronny’s levelled books from a manila envelope. She can almost read it now herself, she confesses, with just a bit of help from Ronny. Even she can’t believe she’s finally learning to read. Done concludes: “Some days, when everyone is gone, you close the door and cry. This was one of those days.” (p. 67)

Without question, God gave us words to bind our hearts together and provide power to our otherwise ordinary lives. He wants us to share our stories. Whenever we frame experiences with words, somehow our lives are given a new context which takes on new meaning that opens our eyes, strengthens our faith, and provides us with new vision, something that educators need often.

No life story is unimportant. In reflecting on our own stories, as educators we work out new ways of acting and being in the future. Some believe that the best way to study curriculum is to study ourselves because once we understand our own “learner” stories, only then will we begin to determine how our students think and feel.

So, what are your stories? What are you learning? And what have you learned?

Resources:

Done, Phillip (2005). *32 Third Graders and One Class Bunny: Life Lessons from Teaching*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

McIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

White, Ellen (1958). *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Mountain View: Pacific Press.