

Letting story shape us

by [Tricia Gates Brown](#)

October 28, 2019

"Being a Christian involves living within the tradition and letting it shape our lives. It means letting these stories *have their way with us.*" — Marcus Borg (emphasis added)

Last week I listened to the book of Genesis on audio. It had been some time since I'd read or listened through it in its entirety. What a rich tradition of story! And like all good tales, the stories of Genesis and the rest of the Bible are ambiguous, often open-ended, full of drama and conflict, and rife with characters who reveal both the best and worst of humanity, sometimes in the very same person. No easy moral tales are these; nor should we make them so.

So how do we read the stories of the Bible? Even the question points at the struggle—since the stories were not really meant to be read, but to be heard and passed along by communities in group storytelling. For hundreds of years before the printing press, biblical stories were passed along orally (or later, read aloud) by people far more skilled as storytellers and story-listeners than we are. We call these masses of pre-modern people illiterate. But it is we who are largely illiterate when it comes to knowing the value of story and how it shapes us. Our deprivation comes from too much story, from inundation and information overload, and from being unable to make out our own unique tales. Our state is akin to standing in the middle of a stereo store with so many kinds of music playing on dozens of different speakers that we are unable to hear a single strain long enough or well enough to be moved and consciously shaped by it. In a way, most of us are shaped by the cacophony.

Through most of human history, distinct people groups had their own distinct stories, whether religious tales, oral traditions, or folk tales passed from generation to generation. People didn't so much "apply their lessons" in a methodical way as they were formed by them, by the repetition of them, and by the characters and lives they came to know through story. Gradually, in listening to different stories

repeatedly, they were shaped into certain kinds of people, and their view of the world was formed by the traditions. This is what story does when allowed to do its job: it shows us who to be. And this not in a clear, linear way. The story has its way with us by making us work at it.

Each of us needs stories in order to grow wise and strong of heart—consciously and dearly held, familiar stories that have their way with us. We need to listen to certain stories again and again, whether those from our religious traditions, from our cultural traditions (oral traditions or folk tales), or even from the corpus of Shakespeare or Toni Morrison or Ursula K. LeGuin or Star Wars. We need to pick a tradition we admire, and then let it work through us. Story is somehow essential, somehow part of the warp and weft of the universe, part of our God-nature.

To me nothing evidences this more than the dream world. Dreams speak wisdom to us from the unconscious, which may often be another way of saying from Spirit. Dreams reveal things we need to see and guide us in remarkable ways. And they do so through story! Metaphors, plots, and characters—the very building blocks of story comprise the language through which Spirit speaks to us at our deepest, most vulnerable level as we are sleeping. In my view, this should convince us of the unsurpassable importance of story for our lives, and of the need to dedicate ourselves to being shaped by story in intentional ways.

With the advent of media platforms like television, home video, and streaming, we have never had more story in our lives. Over the centuries, books replaced oral storytelling, radio replaced books, films and TV programs replaced radio, and with streaming, the availability of story via movies, television, and podcasts has exploded. I delight in consuming stories in all of these forms. The tales don't just entertain me or distract me; they make me think. And because I have thought about the subject in depth over the past few years, I'm conscious that they are also shaping me. They are the building blocks of who I am becoming and of my worldview.

This can be sobering. I was distinctly conscious of this when my daughter was young, and I could choose the books we read and help select the media she consumed when she was with me (it helped that we had a VCR but no television reception throughout her childhood). Children are so malleable and impressionable, and I could see how stories were shaping her, including biblical stories I would read aloud, sometimes palpably uncomfortable with the ambiguity and messaging of

those tales. As she got older and more autonomous, I would try to talk with her about the disturbing messages of certain stories she read or watched. But this got tiresome after a while, and like many parents, I fell asleep on the job.

How can we be more mindful of story in our own lives, both consciously connecting with a specific storytelling tradition (scriptural or otherwise), returning to it over and over again and letting it have its way with us, but also being thoughtful about how entertainment consumption shapes us? By this I'm definitely not commending moralism; I'm not saying we should consume only what is PG-13 and stay away from sex and violence. Often I am more disturbed by the simplistic moral universe of a cartoon on the Disney Channel, carelessly promoting the "myth of redemptive violence" (message: violence can solve all our problems) and a worldview with black-and-white good guys and bad guys, than I am by a drama telling the story of the world in all its muddle and frailty, where violence always perpetuates more violence, and we fail each other, and each of us is an amalgam of dark and light, a dusky, sticky gradation of good and evil.

What I am saying is that we should pay attention to the subtexts of the stories we consume, and not be naïve. These stories are creating us, they are having their way with us. And we give them this power, even, perhaps especially, when we consume unconsciously and uncritically. Sometimes we may not see the effects until we are in situations of crisis and put to the test—and our "characters" play out our real values on the stages of our own lives.

*Originally posted at [Gates Brown's blog](#)*