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THE POWER OF THE STORY

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ABSTRACT

When most people ignore the story of Scripture, there needs to be a different approach to reach them for Jesus regarding knowledge of the biblical narrative. The evangelistic system to reach this generation needs to change. The Next BIG Thing in youth ministry is returning to the power of storytelling. To reach this generation it is imperative to practice storytelling, especially the story of the Bible. Our identity as Seventh-day Adventists depends on the strength of our story in connection with prophetic and historical narratives. We get to tell a story of hope, not of disappointment; a story of cooperation among generations, not generational isolation; and most importantly, a story of hope amidst impossible odds.

STORYTELLING HAS long been a primary way humans have shared morals, lessons, and histories throughout countless generations. Recent neuroscience research has shed much light on the incredible power of storytelling and its effects on the human brain. It is vital to research studies that show the strong connection between stories and the beneficial neurological impact they can have on the brain. It will explore how storytelling is an effective teaching method and how its application can help reach younger generations. By examining storytelling's power on the mind, we can gain a powerful insight into the importance of crafting compelling stories to reach young people.

In the popular Christian series "The Chosen," Jonathan Roumie, who plays Jesus, had a conversation with a poor and injured Samaritan named Melech. His broken leg not only left him with chronic pain and a disability to work his land, but a devastating inability to provide basic needs for his family. Jesus prepared for the encounter by sending John and James to work on his field during the day. In the evening, Jesus and his band of followers showed up at Melech's house with enough food for his family and the uninvited guests. After a substantial meal, the disciples shared their own stories with Jesus. Melech, prompted by his wife, tried to share the reason for his affliction with

the group. Jesus, realizing his uneasiness, motivated the hesitant confessor by saying, "This is what we Jews do, we tell and listen to stories. Our stories connect us" (Jenkins 2021). More than ever, the need to hear, learn, and experience the Word of God is of great importance. Barna Research Institute indicated that only 4% of Gen Z have a biblical worldview (Morrow 2018). This new reality requires teaching the Scripture in this generation's language for the church's survival. That language is stories.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE POWER OF STORYTELLING?

Even though the writers of "The Chosen" took certain liberties while adapting the biblical narrative to make it more appealing to the show's intentions, they did not fail to provide an accurate fact about Jesus. The greatest preacher that ever lived knew the power of storytelling. Time and time again the Savior used stories to teach and engage people with the truths of the Kingdom. A great example is the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus concluded his teaching with a short story about two men building two houses. "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at his teaching" (Matt 7:28, KJV). Jesus used the power of stories to drive the principles from his sermon so people could relate to God's will, their own story, and how to apply it in their lives.

Reason is no longer the instrument to arrive at the truth. Stories have become the mechanism of choice by this generation as a source of truth. Social media platforms offer a plethora of opportunities in which people can share their stories with the world. Hall and Mays (2022) suggested that postmodern thinking favors stories over metanarratives. They offered four reasons. First, stories allow for the explanation of context. Second, stories enable people to find themselves within the narrative. Third, stories allow for nuances and complexities rarely permitted by premises. Fourth, stories help people to see the big picture. Finally, stories guide people to expect conflict and the need to overcome it. Perhaps, that is why Jesus used stories as the primary instrument for his teachings and lessons.

THE SCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

Science demonstrates a critical phenomenon occurring during the process of storytelling. Besides having a good time, there is a connection between the brain and storytelling. According to the *Journal of Neuroscience*, “Storytelling is both a useful and fascinating topic to scientists from many perspectives. From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, it is important to understand how this ancient form of communication engages and even entrains our brains in reproducible ways” (Suzuki, Feliú-Mójer, Hasson, Yehuda & Zarate 2018). When a listener engages in a story, the brain connects on a deeper level. Susana Martinez-Conde (2019, 42) and her team suggested a connection between storytelling and the passing of information. “Storytelling is important in human cognition and interaction, and perhaps especially so in performance and narrative arts, from literature to standup comedy, to theater, cinema, and stage magic.” Also, according to science, there is a human component in the experience of storytelling. “If you’re trying to engage, influence, teach, or inspire others, you should be telling or listening to a story and encouraging others to tell a story with you. You’ll have plenty of science to back you up” (Martinez-Conde et al. 2019).

Uri Hasson, a Princeton professor of psychology and neuroscience, took a deeper dive into the relationship between storytelling and the brain. In his experiment, Hasson connected the brain of a narrator and a listener to a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). This technology tracks how the different regions of the brain respond to stimulation. His work revealed that when the listener identified with story elements, the brain of the narrator and the listener lit up in the same region. He described this occurrence as “a single act performed by two brains” (Lani 2019).

He called this phenomenon brain coupling. The stronger the connection between the narrator and listener is, the stronger the alignment between brain waves—a more profound connection, if you will.

An exciting discovery of the benefits of storytelling as an instrument for transmitting the faith experience is what transpires in the brain while listening to a story of interest. Will Storr (2020) claimed that stories have an addictive effect on people, especially when such narratives leave a gap or awaken anticipation on behalf of the listener. “Brain scans,” he reported, “reveal that curiosity begins as a little kick in the brain’s reward system: we crave to know the answer, or what happens next in the story, in the way we might crave drugs or sex or chocolate” (19). Science agrees that storytelling is a powerful way to connect people, create interest, and transmit a narrative that can unite and change behaviors.

STORYTELLING AND THE BIBLE

The good news is that it is not our responsibility to create a story to tell. The best story is already available. Chatraw (2020, 50) said it well, “We’ve been given a story that is more than just true; it is the best story ever told. It is the story that makes sense of all other stories humans tell worldwide. Jesus’ story provides the answers to all the questions....” What evidence can we find in the Bible about the mandate of storytelling? Moses instructed the people, “And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, ‘*This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt*’” (Exodus 13:8 NKJV).

The people of Israel had been in slavery for 400 years. Their hopes and dreams as God’s chosen people had slowly faded for twenty generations. In an act of grace, God used Moses to bring them out of slavery and into the promised land. However, the events were not forgotten. Moses spoke to the newly liberated community sharing the rules for sharing information. Deuteronomy 4:9-10, (NKJV) declared,

Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, *especially concerning* the day you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, when the

Lord said to me, “Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear

Me all the days they live on the earth, and *that* they may teach their children.”

God wanted to ensure that future generations did not ignore the miracles and events during the forty-year journey from Egypt to Canaan. In his divine wisdom, the Liberator knew that the only way to preserve the account of events was for the first generation to tell the story to the next.

Stories are also expressed in songs. Ps 66:16 invites the listener, “Come *and* hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul.” The prophet Joel echoed the divine command, “Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation (Joel 1:3).”

In the New Testament, a socially isolated man was compelled to tell a story after Jesus liberated him from a legion of demons. Jesus said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he has had compassion on you. And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled (Mark 5:19-20).” A woman whose peers had avoided because of her relationship choices met Jesus by the well. After her experience with Jesus, she couldn’t seem to help herself. “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29) These verses suggest that after witnessing an act of God, the logical response is to tell the story of the experience, especially when the event has been personal.

STORYTELLING AND THE ADVENTIST MESSAGE

Storytelling is not a unique practice for the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. However, there is a tremendous value in incorporating the practice while sharing Adventist doctrine, tradition, and heritage. First, the foundation of the SDA message is a prophetic narrative. From the early days of the church, the conflict between God’s people and the enemy’s schemes to impede the preaching of the Gospel has been evident. Despite the struggle, the Adventist story continues today.

Everything could have ended on the morning of October 23, 1844. George Knight (1993, 217) described the emotions of Henry Emmons, a Millerite, who waited for Jesus’ return that infamous day, “I waited... but after 12 o’clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for two days without any pain—sick with disappointment.” However, today

the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “is one of the world’s fastest-growing organizations, primarily from membership increases in developing nations. The struggle of the Adventist Church’s beginnings tells a story of a passionate people who remained committed to Jesus. The experience encouraged them to share the message of his return. God has led the SDA church to continue sharing the story of a God that defies and overcomes even the most significant obstacles.

The generation of young people today is identified as suffering from trauma, mental health, and socio-political issues like no other generation. A report by the American Psychological Association declared that Gen Z members are “significantly more likely (27 percent) than other generations, including millennials (15 percent) and Gen Xers (13 percent), to report their mental health as fair or poor” (Bethune, 2019, 2). The story of this generation has the potential to identify with the history of our church. Our denominational narrative must be shared as the silver lining to bring hope to a generation. God guided a group of people who, despite their misinterpretation of Scripture, became people who God used to proclaim the ultimate hope.

Intergenerational Cooperation

The early Adventist message was preached primarily by young people. Ellen G. White, one the most prominent SDA founders, was a teenager when she shared the story of her first vision to faithful believers about the return of Jesus. “As the 17-year-old girl reluctantly and tremblingly related this vision to the Adventist group in Portland, they accepted it as light from God” (White 1999, 1) James White, the husband to Ellen, an SDA General Conference Church President and founder of Adventist publications, was born in 1821. In the early days of Adventism, “James and Ellen were married on August 30, 1846. The beginning was one of extreme poverty and challenges, but difficulties brought the couple together.” James was twenty-three when he committed to the preaching of the second coming and, of course, committed to Ellen as well.

It is often believed that the pioneers of the Adventist church were older adults as painted by artists. However, we must not forget most were teenagers when they dedicated their lives to preaching the SDA message. Fortunately, they did not do it alone. Among them was a group of older, more mature, and experienced believers who, like them, felt the calling of God to dedicate their experience and resources to the cause. They were mentored and supported

by older believers, such as 54-year-old retired sea captain Joseph Bates, who shared the same commitment to the message. In “1846, Bates wrote a tract of his own about the Bible Sabbath. This tract came to the attention of James and Ellen... They accepted the seventh-day Sabbath from studying the Bible evidence for it” (White 1999, 1). The message of the SDA church has a story of intergenerational cooperation. Collaboration between the young with their energy and idealistic vision, and the expertise, resources, and wisdom of older members helped the preaching of the message. This time of empowering youth ministry needs to happen again for a revival in our church.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Next BIG Thing in youth ministry is storytelling. Storytelling can be a powerful and effective way to reach Generation Z and provide them with the Bible lessons they need and are eager to learn. By tapping into the neurological benefits incumbent with stories, sermons and teachings can be improved and more effectively remembered. This can lead to more significant and lasting spiritual impact.

Storytelling offers practical benefits as well. Such benefits increase the possibilities of awakening interest, increasing learning, and motivating response to the message. Because of increased engagement, stories can help keep audience members focused and actively engaged during a sermon. It can also make teaching more entertaining and enjoyable. Stories improve a listener’s understanding, which can help the listener better grasp the concept being presented. And stories enhance retention for future recall far better than traditional lectures. A story makes it easier for people to remember and implement the lesson.

Youth ministry always faces the challenge to remain relevant to the current generation. The following recommendations are based on knowing the value of communicating in stories for this generation, the need to help them develop a more robust biblical worldview, and the opportunity to familiarize them with the Adventist identity:

1. **For pastors, youth pastors, and evangelists.**
 - a. *Preach sermons based on Biblical stories.* Instead of preaching sermons that try to prove the correct doctrine and continue to assume that today’s generation knows the stories of the Bible, use stories from Scripture and current life experiences to communicate God’s message for this time.
 - b. *Know your audience.* Understand your audience’s interests, needs, and cultural context. Knowing the context will help you choose stories that resonate with them and make your message more compelling.
 - c. Finally, *use vivid imagery.* Engage your audience’s senses using descriptive language and creating mental images to help them immerse themselves in the story and retain the message.
2. **For preaching professors.**
 - a. *Emphasize the importance of storytelling.* Begin by discussing the value of storytelling in sermons, including its ability to engage the congregation, create emotional connections, and convey complex ideas in relatable ways.
 - b. *Teach the basics of storytelling.* Cover the fundamental elements of a well-structured story, such as character development, setting, conflict, resolution, and take-away message.
 - c. *Develop storytelling skills.* Offer exercises and assignments that focus on different aspects of storytelling, such as creating vivid imagery, pacing, and using body language effectively.
3. **For youth workers.**
 - a. *Utilize available tools.* You don’t have to be a professional preacher. Use visuals, audio, and other media to enhance your storytelling and reinforce your message.
 - b. *Encourage audience participation.* Invite your audience to share their thoughts, reactions, and experiences to create a more interactive and engaging storytelling experience.
4. **For all.** As we strive to reach the younger generations, use a well-crafted sermon based on a biblical story. Invest more time in understanding the target audience and incorporating stories and experiences to aid retention. Biblical stories have intricately intertwined God’s Word throughout almost four thousand years. As we continue our outreach in faith, stories should be incorporated as an essential

part of reaching young people and sharing our Seventh-day Adventist identity.

ministry is to make the story of the Gospel relevant to this generation. Sharing the stories of Scripture can help evangelize this generation. Sharing the Adventist church's story can help alleviate this generation's greatest needs: hope and empowerment.

SUMMARY

Young people today communicate in stories. Unfortunately, they are not well acquainted with the stories in the Scriptures. Therefore, the biggest challenge in today's youth

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