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Learning the Bible in the Twenty-first Century

Lessons from Harry Potter and Vampires

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I am a Roman Catholic layperson, I teach at a Lutheran seminary in Minnesota, my research centers on digital media and faith, and at the moment my husband Eric and I are living and learning with our two sons—Nathaniel who is twelve and Alex who is seventeen.

All of these elements of my life contribute to how I see the world. I hope today to offer you some ideas that I have found helpful—but I offer them as moments that I hope invite you to your own analysis and provoke your own extended curiosity. I might sound like I am offering a specific prescription, but what I hope I am really offering is a way of seeing that will help you more adequately to construct a prescription for your own context.

Any of you who are yourselves young, or hang out with young people, will likely know that they are keen learners. Young people are amazingly good at ferreting out information that they are interested in. They are adept users of varieties of digital tools, and they are passionate about the people and ideas they care about.

On the other hand, precisely because of their abilities in these ways, when you present young people with the smorgasbord of options that is available in the twenty-first century U.S. context, it is very difficult to expand their interests beyond what they already enjoy.

Last spring the *Wall Street Journal* published a list of things workplace managers needed to understand if there were to manage successfully

what the author called “the Facebook generation.” The list had twelve elements on it:

1. All ideas compete on an equal footing.
2. Contribution counts for more than credentials.
3. Hierarchies are natural, not prescribed.
4. Leaders serve rather than preside.
5. Tasks are chosen, not assigned.
6. Groups are self-defining and self-organizing.
7. Resources get attracted, not allocated.
8. Power comes from sharing information, not hoarding it.
9. Opinions compound and decisions are peer-reviewed.
10. Users can veto most policy decisions.
11. Intrinsic rewards matter most.
12. Hackers are heroes.¹

I have been involved in religious education for a long time, and in most of the places where I have worked, these characteristics are the opposite of how most churches organize learning.

So my first big idea for you today is that the question we need to engage in the church is *not* “how to” teach the Bible in the parish. Rather, the essential question is *why* to learn the Bible at all in the first place.

Why would a person want to learn the Bible?

There are certainly many rather negative answers offered up by churches: Things like: because it’s the Word of God, and thus by implication, because I or we say so. Things like: because if you don’t learn the Bible, you’re going to hell. Things like: because every morally good person should know the Bible. Of course, these are not usually the explicit answers offered by churches, but rather more of the implicit curriculum that comes filtered through popular culture and other media.

I do not know about you, but I know that with my twelve year old these reasons do not work very well. In the first place, he is in a stage of his life where he is not convinced there even *is* a God. He is also clear that simply “because I say so” is not a valid reason. In part, I am to blame

for that one, because I have worked hard to help him cultivate genuine skepticism in a world of competing beliefs.

As for the other reasons, while I believe Nathaniel truly desires to live a moral life, at this point I do not think it is because he is afraid of hell. In fact, given the extent to which he is attracted to TV shows like *Supernatural*, *Reaper*, and so on, I rather think his curiosity might lead him to inquire *more* about hell, rather than to avoid it.

We could draw a couple of conclusions from this that are sustained not simply by my anecdotal experiences with my children, but also from the scholarly research that is currently ongoing.

One of the key shifts that has taken place in the last couple of decades of research into teaching and learning is that scholars and educators have come to understand that we need to shift our attention from “teaching” to “learning.” That is not to say that good teaching is no longer relevant or necessary—far from it! Rather, it is to note that we used to believe that there was something like “good teaching” that was universally applicable and consisted of a set of specific tools and practices.

Now we have grown to understand that good teachers design and sustain learning environments that are adaptive and geared to the specific learners found there. Good teachers are good improvisers, because at any given point in time the learners they are working with will come from very different contexts, very different backgrounds, with differing starting “databases” so to speak.

The title of one of my favorite books about adult learning makes this point directly. It is a book by Jane Vella entitled *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*.² Today in talking with you about teaching the Bible in the twenty-first century, I am going to focus on *learning* the Bible.

There are two main parts to this presentation, each of which is organized around a group of three words. In the first part I am going to explore the dynamics of “confirmation, contradiction, and continuity” as we think about learning the Bible amidst media culture. In the second part I am going to pick up the final piece of that first triad — continuity — and consider another triad within it, that of “authority, authenticity, and agency.” By the time we are done, I hope to convince you that learning the Bible in the context we inhabit will require all of us to attend to

these two triads, and will give us at least one powerful answer to “why” people might want to learn the Bible.

Confirmation, Contradiction, Continuity

Robert Kegan, a scholar whose work I respect enormously, believes transformative learning is a process of confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. Effective learning, he argues, begins with understanding where people are in their current frames of knowing.³

That is, in order to walk with someone on their learning journey, you must begin by understanding how they currently see the world. You must “confirm” the reality they are living. To return to the example of my twelve year old, the issue is not simply that he is uninterested in learning the Bible, it may also be that his current conceptions of the Bible are problematic. But before I can help him to understand something new, before I can help him to put together a more grounded and full notion of what it means to learn with and from and through the Bible, I need to start with where he currently is. I gain credibility and authority with him by being able to demonstrate that I know the world as he sees it.

This moment of seeking to discern the reality learners live in—what many educators would call a moment of assessment—is often the least engaged element of learning in the church.

Concretely speaking, if we want to help people *desire* to learn the Bible, it might help us to know something of what they currently think about the Bible. Given that my work centers on media culture, that is where I will take you.

There are biblical references—even actual engagements with the Bible—scattered all throughout popular culture. Here are a handful of video clips that may be familiar to you. Do this exercise with me. Find your handout, and the third page, where a linear spectrum is drawn. After each clip I show you, place the clip somewhere on that spectrum. Each clip is about three minutes long.

- a. “Fix the Bible” from *Firefly*, “Jaynestown,” season 1, episode 7, 2002
- b. “The Bible is not a weapon” from *Saved!*, United Artists, directed by Brian Dannelly, 2004

- c. “Baracknophobia” from The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, 25 June 2008
- d. “Apt analogies” from The Simpsons, “She of little faith,” season 13, episode 275, 2001⁴

So what did you discover? How did you decide what was real about a particular clip? What criteria did you use? Was it the genre? Was it the production values? Was it the message you felt the creator was conveying? Did it have anything to do with whether you felt manipulated or not?

Before we ever sit down with someone in a learning setting, or better yet, before we venture out to their contexts to learn with them, they already have an interpretive framework in their head with regard to media culture. That framework is deeply contextual, and what was most real for me, is likely *not* most real for you.

Each of these clips probably had something in them you could use to reinforce whatever you would like to teach about the Bible, but they probably also had things in them that you would like to contradict.

Perhaps our challenge with the Bible, and inviting people to learn with it, is not so much that they are not interested—perhaps it is that in fact people have already learned a lot about the Bible, and they are loathe to learn much more. It is not so much that the Bible does not matter to people or does not have an impact on them—it clearly does. Maybe part of the difficulty is that we, as educators in religious settings, want the Bible to matter to people *differently* from how it currently does, for different ends than it does, with different meaning than it does.

Confirmation is only the first step in learning. As Kegan notes, *contradiction* is a crucial element of learning. That is a moment when our meaning frames are cracked open in some way. Such contradiction, such cracking open, can happen simply through living. And it can happen when an educator enters the learning moment and poses some kind of specific problem, points out something previously unseen.

It is crucial for educators to understand where their learners are situated, the discursive terrain they inhabit; but it is perhaps even more important to think carefully about what kinds of contradictions live in that terrain, and what kind of contradictions need to be introduced.

One of the personal benefits for me of hanging around Lutherans as much as I do, is that I have been deeply steeped in a set of understandings about the Bible that open up possibilities beyond what we have just looked at in these pop culture clips.

Lutherans, for instance, frequently point out that Word of God has three very essential and intertwined meanings, only one of which is Scripture or the Bible. The first meaning of that phrase is Jesus Christ. That is, Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate. The second meaning of Word of God is what Lutheran Christians argue is the central proclamation of Christian faith: Law and Gospel. The third meaning is Holy Scripture, that is, the Bible.

Consider then, the implications that these three intertwined meanings have for understanding the Word of God in the Bible as represented in the video clips you just watched.

River's need to "fix" the Bible betrays her sense that it is a static, finished, somehow complete object—rather than a text of a community that is living, breathing, and still learning who God is, while the Shepherd Book can see how faith is a crucial element of engaging the Bible.

Word of God as Law and Gospel connects directly to our lived sense of sin and forgiveness. But that sense of what is sin and what is forgiveness can all too easily become a weapon in the hands of some, rather than an invitation. You can see this in the struggle both of the young people in the movie *Saved!* as well as in the late night satirical comedy show. What is God's promise? And how are we to understand what that promise calls us to?

Lisa Simpson's claim that the analogy is apt is a call from within the midst of "secular popdom" for a church that connects its Scripture with its living witness. Indeed, most of what is funny about that particular clip requires knowing the scriptural allusions; so simply "dressing up" the message is not deeply engaging it. Lisa uses the Bible itself to critique the situation.

How might we move towards creating learning environments that can help people live into these kinds of notions?

First, we have to foster a *desire* to learn more of the Bible; we have to find ways to be present where people live, to tap into their questions and yearning.

Second, we have to find ways to provide *compelling exploration* of the contradictions people inhabit, exploration that draws us into those contradictions, that does not seek to evade or avoid them.

Kegan notes, however, that there is a *final* piece to which we must attend—continuity. It is not enough to break open people’s meaning frames through contradiction if we cannot at the same time offer them a new frame that still has continuity with the older one. Without that continuity, what often happens is what John Hull has called “premature ultimates”—bounded, stuck forms of knowing where people retreat into fortress mentalities or escape into relativistic disavowals.⁵ How might we move from confirming our learners’s reality to inviting them to see the contradictions present there? How do we do that while at the same time providing them enough continuity with their previous reality to walk forward faithfully in transformative ways?

Authority, Authenticity, Agency

There may be no more critical task in learning the Bible than this question of continuity, so I will focus on the challenge of providing continuity as people engage contradiction. To do this, I want to expand on continuity by bringing in the second triad I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the elements of authority, authenticity, and agency. Let me give you two very brief illustrations of those elements.

For the first, go back to the list of Facebook culture attributes quoted at the start:

1. All ideas compete on an equal footing.
2. Contribution counts for more than credentials.
3. Hierarchies are natural, not prescribed.
4. Leaders serve rather than preside.
5. Tasks are chosen, not assigned.
6. Groups are self-defining and –organizing.
7. Resources get attracted, not allocated.
8. Power comes from sharing information, not hoarding it.
9. Opinions compound and decisions are peer-reviewed.
10. Users can veto most policy decisions.

11. Intrinsic rewards matter most.
12. Hackers are heroes.

Consider how each of these has to do with one or another of these dynamics. “All ideas compete on an equal footing” embodies shifting notions of authority. “Resources get attracted, not allocated” and “intrinsic rewards matter most” is about authenticity. “Tasks are chosen, not assigned” and “users can veto most policy decisions” are about agency. All three of these elements—authority, authenticity, agency—are shifting amidst media cultures.

Or another brief illustration would be the phenomenal success of the Harry Potter books. As various writers have pointed out, the books celebrate the critique of *authority*. They arrived during a cultural moment in which we are questioning received authority, questioning to some extent the world as we know it. So, too, does Harry, the chief character in the books, question the authority of the family he was fostered with, the teachers in his classrooms, even, eventually, Albus Dumbledore. In the process he has to come to grips with a world that has an entire dimension to it of which he was largely unaware. The books tap into our widespread sense of unease with what we can know; they give voice to our sense that there is more to this world than we have been able to identify.

We enter into this world of make-believe, and it comes alive in such a way as to show us something of ourselves in the process. The world J.K. Rowling describes *feels* real, it *feels authentic*, even though we know it is a fantasy, a story, make-believe. At the same time, kids being kids, there has been a tremendous amount of shared imagining with the world of the books taking place “off the page,” if you will. Kids create websites. Kids dress up as Potter characters. Kids have *agency* in real time and real space—not to mention that the characters of the books themselves demonstrate a kind of agency in the story that is more powerful than that of mere muggles.

Three elements: Authority, authenticity, agency. The shifts these elements of authority, authenticity, and agency are undergoing hold both promise and challenge to those of us in religious community. They also are a particular key to the puzzle of what it means to provide continuity.

Let me take the first one, authority, and give you an extended example of what I mean when I suggest that engaging shifts in authority is neces-

sary to supporting learning the Bible. Engaging shifts in authority directly can help to provide the kind of continuity that can draw learners beyond contradiction. Let's talk, for instance, about an assertion we could make, that the Bible creates community and therefore is best understood in community. This is not how our wider culture represents the Bible. Many people believe the opposite: that the Bible is something best understood personally, in individual devotion. Or, alternatively, rather than the Bible *creating* community, many people believe that the Bible provokes divisiveness, that the Bible foments conflict, it *divides* community.

To argue that the Bible creates community is to make a claim which sharply contradicts some learners' reality. There is a natural tendency for learners to want to draw back in one of two ways in engaging such contradiction. One tendency is to accept that the Bible creates community, and then to assume that that community is narrowly construed and strictly defined. This is the path that leads towards fundamentalism. It offers a "premature ultimate" that creates rigidly defined identity boundaries. A second tendency, which might at first seem to be the opposite, is to reject the claim that the Bible creates community all together and hold onto individualized, privatized forms of religious knowing. In this case, everything becomes relative. The Bible's meanings are understood individually and privately. What I take from the Bible is what I take from it, and what you take from it is equally true — for you — even if the meanings contradict each other. This is the path that leads toward relativism.

To get beyond either of these responses to the contradiction, however, we need to find, to provide, to offer, to glean *continuity* in the face of the contradiction. Something from our previous form of understanding needs to be connected to a new frame that resolves the contradiction. In this example, I think we can offer continuity by drawing deeply from the wells of personal experience that emerge from shared learning. Communal forms of knowing, even the most basic participatory forms, have both resonance and dissonance with shifting notions of authority. They have resonance if authority is understood as *emerging from* but not wholly *constrained by* that community. They have dissonance, however, if the flattening of authority is understood primarily as heightening individual authority, heightening individualist forms of knowing.

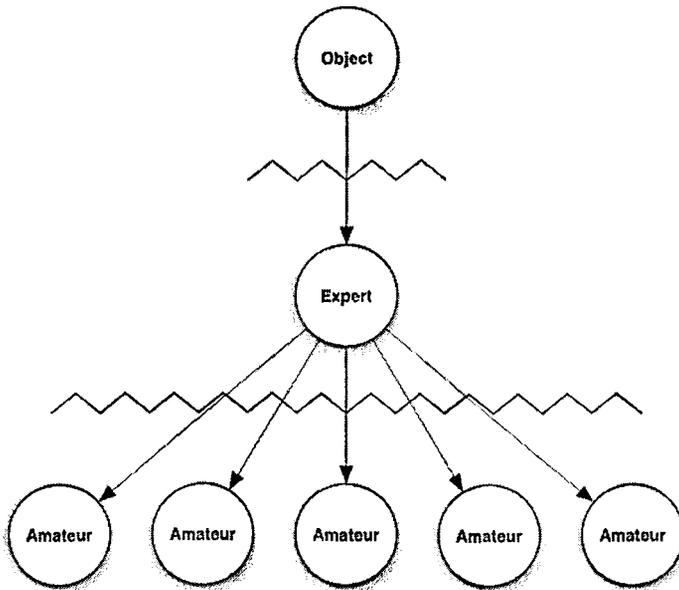
One of the stronger claims that Christians make is that the Bible is best understood in community. It is not simply a book for individuals. The

Word of God is for all. From the earliest texts of God’s promises to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, to letters that Paul and other early Christians shared in the context of spreading the news of Jesus, these are texts that are *of and for community*. They are God’s story, God’s story of relationship with human beings.

When we share ideas about the Bible, when we try to teach—and thus support learning—we need to be aware, consciously and consistently, of understanding *authority* in community-oriented ways, but community-oriented ways that draw out new meaning, rather than closing it down.

One of the real challenges we face in teaching the Bible is that in the church we have not consciously designed learning in that way.

Consider this set of diagrams.⁶

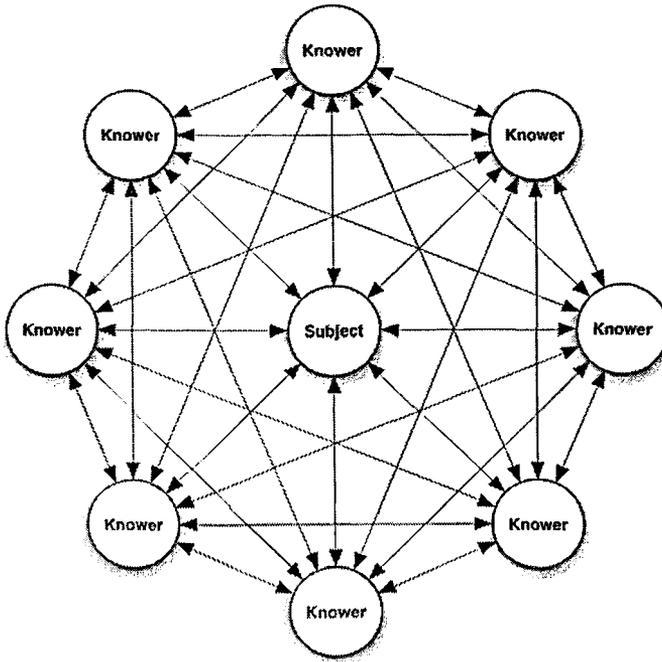


In this one, taken from Parker Palmer’s book *The Courage to Teach*, knowing is depicted as information that is transferred from an object by an expert to a group of amateurs.

The movement of information is unilinear, that is, it goes in only one direction. It may seem more efficient—certainly, if the information does

not get to the amateurs there is clearly someone to hold accountable—but is efficiency what we are aiming for?

On the other hand, here is a different way of thinking about it.



In this diagram Palmer shows the learners gathered around the subject to be known. Each learner has a direct connection with that subject—and indeed, “subject” is a much more descriptive term for active engagement—and each learner has a relationship with each other. So the knowing builds from the community. Indeed, the more knowers are involved, the more robust the knowing.

Now, if you are like many of the other groups with whom I have spoken, you are probably asking yourself: Where is the teacher in this diagram? Is the teacher simply one of the many knowers? Certainly every teacher must be also a learner, but I would argue that the teacher in this diagram is invisible. The teacher is the person or persons who are designing the environment so as to allow each learner to stay in direct contact with the subject, as well as in shared relationship with each other. The teacher is the person who makes sure that the ignorance of one person does not become shared ignorance or that the assertions of one person

do not silence the knowing of others. The teacher ensures that learners stay in direct relationship with the subject at the heart of it all. Palmer notes that “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to the truth is practiced.”⁷

When we teach in this way, when our patterns better match the second diagram, learners come to understand that authority and credibility are built up, are created and shared, not simply presumed, assumed, or imposed. As the Wall Street Journal piece I quoted earlier noted, “ideas compete on an equal footing” and “hierarchies are natural not prescribed.” What does that mean here? It means that if we start from where people are in relation to the Bible and we work from there, we do our best work by inviting the most robust and diverse group of conversants into the conversation that we can.

We practice Bible study, for instance, as a means of listening and hospitality. As my colleague Rolf Jacobson noted last summer at the Book of Faith jubilee event held prior to the churchwide assembly, when we look for leaders/teachers of Bible study, we ought to be looking for leaders whose gift is that of hospitality. We create shared authority by supporting *relationality*. In doing so we are also creating *continuity* for learners. We are inviting them to understand experientially that there is deep *personal* connection to their knowing of the Bible *and* there is deep *communal* knowing. They have an experience in which they can be drawn beyond the dichotomies of either fundamentalism or relativism. This is an example of creating continuity by addressing the realm of *authority*.

What about authenticity? How might we provide continuity through engaging with dynamics of authenticity? In media culture, as Thomas Boomershine once noted, we tend to reason by means of sympathetic identification rather than philosophical argument.⁸ We *feel* our way through a story, we find a particular movie compelling because it *feels* authentic. But what constitutes “authenticity”? One component has to do with congruence between our feelings and our expectations and experiences. In feeling our way through situations, do our feelings resonate, do they match our previous experiences and our expectations?

This is an element of media cultures which can be very perplexing, because on the one hand our media provide a seemingly endless variety of stories into which to be drawn, into which our experiences can be tuned.

Yet on the other hand that endless variety is actually fairly narrowly circumscribed. We find ourselves flooded by media in which stories are told and we are invited to “feel with” various characters, but the key question might well be whether this “feeling with” enlarges us or narrows us.

Which brings me to the world of vampires. Unless you have been completely isolated from popular culture, you know that vampires, zombies, and other denizens of the undead imagination are particularly prevalent in pop culture right now. Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan had a beautifully argued piece in *The New York Times* reflecting on this phenomenon. They write that:

In other words, whereas other monsters emphasize what is mortal in us, the vampire emphasizes the eternal in us. Through the panacea of its blood it turns the lead of our toxic flesh into golden matter.

In a society that moves as fast as ours, where every week a new “blockbuster” must be enthroned at the box office, or where idols are fabricated by consensus every new television season, the promise of something everlasting, something truly eternal, holds a special allure.⁹

This is an argument that I find deeply intriguing. Those of us who confess a God who grants us eternity on the basis of faith ought to be paying attention to elements of this argument. What is the *feeling* we might confirm here? Surely we do not wish to confirm the reality of vampires and zombies—whose very fantasmic nonreality is probably also part of their attraction—but what about the underlying emotion, the desire for something that lasts, for eternity, that might be expressed in our fascination with vampire stories?

Del Toro and Hogan go on:

Part of the reason for the great success of “Dracula” is generally acknowledged to be its appearance at a time of great technological revolution. . . . Today as well, we stand at the rich uncertain dawn of a new level of scientific innovation. . . . Our technological arrogance mirrors more and more the Wellsian dystopia of dissatisfaction, while allowing us to feel safe and connected at all times. We can call, see, or hear al-

most anything and anyone no matter where we are. For most people then, the only remote place remains within. “Know thyself” we do not.¹⁰

Yet “know thyself” is a fundamental element of Christian faith. “Love thy neighbor as thyself” suggests a demand to know something of who one is. I believe that our embodiment teaches us something about an incarnational God, and our ability to attend to that embodiment, in all of its rich, confusing, and complex diversity, is a key to thoughtful theology. More and more of popular culture is infused with searching and wandering and *feeling* on themes that are at the heart of Christian faith.

Before you begin to think, however, that I am simply an apologist for popular culture, someone who accepts any and all things that flourish there, remember that I am exploring contradictions so as to also ponder what kinds of continuity learning the Bible might offer us.

Sympathetic identification is a process of “feeling with.” There is much in religious community which invites “feeling with,” but I would argue that what we are actually seeking in faith, in Christian community, and thus in learning the Bible is not so much “sympathetic identification” as it is “empathetic identification.” The continuity we have to offer when we engage authenticity comes from stretching beyond sympathy to empathy. When we claim deeply embodied knowing, deeply embodied “feeling with,” we need to always link that knowing within community. Sympathy involves using your own experiences to “feel with” someone else. Although it involves an “other,” sympathy does not stretch beyond oneself; it is still profoundly self-centered. Empathy, on the other hand, involves being able to feel with another even if one has *never* had the same experience, and even if the experience places one’s own experiences in a different light. Empathy invites and involves self-differentiation and compassion that is other-oriented.

You can see the distinction between sympathy and empathy at work in many Bible stories. Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” and his reply is that we are called to love our enemies (Luke 10:29). The “trick” or “turn” of many of the parables is that a listener often identifies with a particular character, only to discover that the story rewards a different one. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20) *every* worker is paid the same, even the ones who only worked towards the end

of the day. Hearing that story we wonder, along with the characters who worked all day, “Shouldn’t we be paid more because we worked longer?” That’s a question arising from *sympathetic identification*. Feeling, on the other hand, that everyone should be paid the same regardless of how many hours worked—that is a feeling that might grow out of an empathic sense that a worker who spent most of the day waiting to work *without* hope, *suffered* in doing so. Or, perhaps, that all are entitled to share in common the abundance being offered.

Parables are a specific form of narrative in the Christian tradition, and as Anderson/Foley note:

Parabolic narratives show the seams and edges of the myths we fashion. Parables show the fault lines beneath the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we build for ourselves. Myth may give stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption.¹¹

Anderson and Foley are giving different language to the same dynamic I have been tracing. You might say that the “mythic provides continuity” while the “parabolic creates contradictions.”

The reality that much of media culture invites sympathetic identification, then, is not so much an impossible obstacle to Christian storying, as it is a first step and an invitation. The Bible demands *empathy*, but our wider contexts teach us *sympathy*. This contradiction is particularly evident within the narrative forms most prevalent in mediated spaces. Unfortunately, certain constrained versions of Christian identity actually limit the development of empathy by closing down invitations to experience “otherness” as a means towards transformation. Perhaps the most obvious example of this constriction might be the response of several Christian communities to *Harry Potter*. In part because the novels have central characters who are witches and wizards, these Christian communities argue that their children should not be allowed to read the books, for fear of contamination. One element of that fear is risking identification with an “other” who is far outside the bounds of one’s own community.

Yet empathy is a form of identification that does not merge. In other words, one can empathize with someone else *without becoming* that other. Sympathy, on the other hand, invites identification through a kind of self-centeredness.

So, too, the challenge of representing homosexuality in positive ways in mass media. Many progressive Christians champion such portrayals, believing that in inviting sympathetic identification, such media representations hasten change. But sympathetic identification is not what the gospel commands. *Empathy* is what is demanded. So while progressive Christians might celebrate these portrayals for confirming their own beliefs, the deeper call to such Christians really ought to be one of being drawn into relationship with those who *condemn* homosexuality, precisely because the gospel calls us to love those from whom we are estranged, those who are strangers to us, even enemies.

Similarly, many conservative Christians fear positive portrayals of gays and lesbians in part because they fear people might identify with them, and perhaps even “become” them. Such a fear ignores the scientific research that being gay is not a choice, but rather a given. But it also ignores the possibility of being able to empathize with someone who is very different from you, without in some way *becoming* that person. Even the most conservative of Christian communities ought to be able to find ways into *empathy* with those who are different.

There is another lesson in the stories of vampires. Many of them — I like Octavia Butler’s book *Fledgling*, for instance — explore what it feels like to be drawn into relationship with someone of whom you are deeply frightened, only to discover a relationship that arises even while the differences do not go away. To provide continuity past the contradictions of “feeling with,” to provide continuity that allows an authenticity bigger than similarity, we have to stretch into empathy — an invitation the Bible makes over and over again.

So what does this mean for religious educators? For local churches? For learning the Bible? We need to think about all the learning we are engaged in, in terms of stretching sympathetic identification into empathetic identification. We need to help people draw on their own experiences as a way into community, but not into sameness. Learning with the Bible can do this.

I have spoken now about *providing continuity through engaging experiences of shared authority*, or participatory knowing. And I have spoken about *providing continuity through deepening authenticity from sympathy into empathy*. Let me continue to the third element, that of agency.

Agency has to do with whether persons feel like they are able to “make a difference,” are able to “have an impact.” In the United States it is common to see action on pressing issues represented in fairly individualistic ways. Indeed, careful examination of the ways in which newscasts represent action leads to the conclusion that agency is overwhelmingly represented as a function of consumption, or at least of individual action through circulation of funds. A powerful example would be responses to the earthquake in Haiti. People view the earthquake damage on television, and they are invited to send money to relief organizations.

The systemic underlying poverty that exists in Haiti, the lack of infrastructure and a functioning government, makes the challenge of recovery far greater than anything funding alone can accomplish. Of course for Haiti to recover, more funds *will* be necessary. But where are the calls for Americans to change the structural financial relationship between Haiti and the world? Where are the calls to cancel all debt? To let any Haitian who can reach us, come into the U.S. as a refugee? Only very slowly, if at all, are people raising these issues. We are *not accustomed* to thinking in communal, structural, systemic terms when we think of agency. Instead, we have been socialized into thinking in terms of spending funds, accumulating funds, and other primarily individual responses.

It is not surprising that many people understand *consumption* as their primary means of agency when that is what the media show us. I am not seeking to condemn consumption (or limiting one’s consumption) as a form of action, rather I am seeking to call attention to the dilemma that *only* representing agency in that way is highly problematic for religious communities.

For millennia religious communities have conceived of *agency* as an attribute of humanity which is granted by, empowered through, God. Differing theologies will describe such agency in different ways, but one example would be a belief that God is at work in the world and human beings share in that action as elements of God’s ongoing creative activity. The Bible begins and ends with the agency of God. While individual human beings do indeed make individual human choices and take individual human action in Bible stories, much of the time the action that is individually oriented—or even more so, only about consumption—has devastating consequences.

Given such an understanding, it is highly problematic for communities of faith to reinforce notions of agency through consumption, yet that is precisely what many of us are doing. In the U.S. we have a huge industry devoted to producing Christian “stuff”—everything from books and movies, to music, clothing, household goods, and so on. While it is also true that some Christian communities have begun to focus on lowering consumption—particularly as a means of easing global climate change—far too many of us continue to perceive agency in this individualized way.

Weaving Our Story with God’s Story

What are our alternatives?

Traditionally we have posed alternatives through practices of communal worship—corporate prayer and communal discernment, for instance. Recently there has been a movement growing in the U.S. around notions of “practices of faith” that has highlighted a number of other such forms of action: testimony, discernment, healing, singing, and so on. In these practices it is God’s agency that is clearly highlighted, while human agency is intimately connected to God *through community*.¹² The reality is that many of these practices are increasingly unfamiliar to people, even those who do have a vibrant faith community accessible to them.

One of the gifts, for me, of the media literacy movement has been learning that the best way to help people become literate—really what we mean is “fluent”—in media, is not by teaching them how to critically interpret various media, but rather by helping them to create in various media. That is, kids learn far more about media framing by attempting to create their own videos, then by being told how to “view” specific media. They become critics in the process of learning how to create in a specific medium.

Thus if we are going to “contradict” the notion that individual agency is tied to practices of consumption, and offer a larger view of God’s agency creating in our midst, of God’s mission in the world through our hands, our hearts, our eyes, then we have to find ways for people to tell their stories as bound up with God’s story. We cannot simply pound into them that this is God’s story, we have to invite them to discover in their own stories, and in the stories of the communities of which they are a part, and the communities which empathy invites them to engage, *God’s story*.

We need to be creating learning environments in which we ask learners to ponder questions like:

- What do you/we think God is doing here?
- What do you/we hear God saying personally, to you?
- What do you/we hear God saying to us?

We need to ask those questions not simply or only of biblical texts, but also and perhaps even more often, of the media culture stories all around us. And we need to engage each other's responses *in community* not in isolation. As we are learning with the Bible, we should be able to help each other live in a God-saturated world. And if we are doing THAT well, than the empathy that grows will be fundamentally transformative of the world we live in; and the authority we create will be more sustaining and generative.

I started by telling you stories of my twelve year old, Nathaniel. Let me begin to close by noting that to date he has been most fascinated—when it comes to learning the Bible—by the sections of the *Lutheran Handbook* that talk about the seven funniest Bible stories, the five grossest Bible stories, and so on.¹³ I am working to find ways to meet him where he lives, where his primary reality is defined, and to draw him both more deeply into that and beyond it. Rather than avoiding popular culture because we fear diluting or contaminating biblical learning, we need to figure out where people's desires and curiosities are residing, and find ways to connect them with the deep stories and vivid poetry of the Bible.

But as we do so, we need to be continually alert—as educational leaders, as pastoral leaders—to the mythic/parabolic dialectic, to the contradiction/continuity dynamic. We need to focus on developing empathy, not simply sympathy. And we need to do so in ways that help people weave their own stories with God's story.

If we really take seriously the Bible as the Word of God, if we really believe that God is continuing to act in our midst, then we need to be alert and listening all around us, not only to those voices who claim—often on their own authority and their own behalf—that they are authoritative voices for God, but also to all those other voices, particularly, perhaps, those voices who seem most distant. We need to meet our learners where they live. We need to draw them more deeply into the contradictions they are experiencing. And we need to move together, into our shared story.

Confirm. Contradict. Continue.

Authorize. Authenticate. Take action.

Why learn the Bible? Because it tells us who we are, and who we can become.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gary Hamel, Wall Street Journal blog Management 2.0 (retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/management/2009/03/24/the-facebook-generation-vs-the-fortune-500/> on 3 September 2010).
- ² Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, 2002).
- ³ See both Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ Video excerpts from the following: *Firefly* (Season 1, Episode 7, “Jaynestown,” first aired on Fox, October 2002). *Saved!* (United Artists, 2004). *The Daily Show* (Episode 13085, “Baracknophobia,” first aired on the Comedy Channel, June 25, 2008). *The Simpsons* (Season 13, Episode 275, “She of little faith,” first aired December 16, 2001).
- ⁵ John Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).
- ⁶ Epistemological diagrams from Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, 1998), figures 4.1 “the objectivist myth of truth,” and 4.2 “the community of truth.”
- ⁷ Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 88.
- ⁸ Thomas Boomershine, “How to be a faith witness in the communications media? Conditions requisite for the public communications value of faith witnesses,” paper presented at the Witnessing to the Faith, An Activity of the Media conference, St. Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario, May 30, 1999.
- ⁹ Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, “Why Vampires Never Die,” Op-Ed, *The New York Times* (July 30, 2009) (retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/31/opinion/31deltoro.html> on 3 September 2010).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 14.
- ¹² See, in particular, Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-

Bass, 1997) and Bass and Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); as well as the website www.practicingourfaith.org.

- ¹³ Skrade and Satter, eds., *The Lutheran Handbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005).