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Rolf A. Jacobson

Luther Seminary, rjacobso@luthersem.edu

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We Are Our Stories: Narrative Dimension of Human Identity and its Implications for Christian Faith Formation¹

ROLF JACOBSON

THE NARRATIVE DIMENSION OF HUMAN IDENTITY: WE ARE OUR STORIES

On his 1991 CD, *Nothing but a Burning Light*, Bruce Cockburn sang the question, “What is the soul of a man?...Won’t somebody tell me, tell me what is the soul of a man?”²

Not a bad question.

If we update the question a little—tweaking the non-inclusive language and subbing in the concept of identity for that of soul—we have a pretty good twenty-first-century theological question: What is human identity? Who are we?

In recent years, philosophers, cognitive psychologists, theologians, anthropologists, and sociologists have all asked a version of that question. Usually when

¹This essay originated as my part of the 2013 Aus Memorial Lectures, on which I collaborated with Professor Craig Koester. I am grateful to Professor Koester and the Aus Memorial Lecture Committee for the opportunity. I offer thanks to God for the life and witness of Professor Aus and dedicate this essay to his memory.

²Bruce Cockburn, “Soul of a Man,” *Nothing but a Burning Light*, Columbia Records, CD, 1991.

Increasingly, representatives of diverse disciplines have come to a significant consensus about human identity. Each of us constructs and lives in a narrative that is, in fact, us. If this is the case, we will need an outside source to construct a narrative that is both good and true—one to which and in which we can give our lives. Such a story is given us in Holy Scripture and in the collective memory of the church.

diverse thinkers simultaneously come at the same question from a divergence of methodological perspectives, all they stir up is a cloud of dust. But in this case, the diverse scholars from divergent disciplines have actually arrived at a rather shocking thing: consensus. And the consensus is that the warp and woof of human identity is narrative.

Simply put: We are our stories.

Oversimplifying to the extreme, the argument goes something like this. The definition of a story, at its bare-bones basic level, is that something happened after something else. All human experience happens in time. Which means, of course, that all human experience happens after something. In other words, we human beings have no access to our experiences outside of story. We are our stories.

Furthermore, we store our experiences as stories. John Winslade and Gerald Monk call this “narrative perception.” They write that “people tend to organize their experiences in story form...we use stories to make sense of our lives and relationships.”³

Let me resort to a small chorus of quotations that illustrate the seeming consensus about the narrative dimension of human identity:

- “We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’ and that this narrative is us, our identities.”⁴
- “self is a perpetually rewritten story...we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.”⁵
- “[T]he formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.”⁶
- “We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the center of that autobiography is one’s *self*. And if you still want to know what the self *really* is, you are making a category mistake.”⁷
- Marya Schechtman inquires into “which actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits and so on...make her the person she is.” She argues that “a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life.... A person’s identity...is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers.”⁸

³John Winslade and Gerald Monk, *Narrative Mediation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 3.

⁴Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 110.

⁵Jerry Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 71/3 (2004) 694, emphasis in original. This article was originally published in *Social Research* 54/1 (1987) 15.

⁶Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39/3 (1971) 291.

⁷Daniel Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Frank Kessel, Pamela Cole, and Dale Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992) 114, emphasis in original.

⁸Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) 73–74, 93–94.

- The “basic condition of making sense of ourselves [is] that we grasp our lives in a narrative” and have an understanding of our lives “as an unfolding story.” This is the inescapable structural requirement of human agency.⁹
- “We tell stories to describe ourselves not only so others can understand who we are but also so we can understand ourselves... [T]he collection of stories we have compiled is to some extent who we are, what we have to say to the world, and tell the world the state of our mental health.” And, “We interpret reality through our stories and open our realities up to others when we tell our stories.”¹⁰
- A person is “the subject of a narrative that runs from one’s birth to one’s death....”¹¹

I realize it can be tedious to read through this, or any other, list of quotations. But it is worth taking the time to do so because, as noted earlier, these thinkers come from divergent fields—biology, psychology, theology, philosophy, clinical therapy, and so on. In spite of their diverse methodological starting points, they wind up converging on a common destination. Galen Strawson sums up the common conclusion: “There is widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories.”¹²

*we are finite, fallible human sinners who are not capable
either of knowing the whole truth or of telling the truth
when we do know it*

WE ARE OUR STORIES... BUT OUR STORIES ARE INADEQUATE

If it is true that we understand reality as a story, that we are our own continually rewritten stories, and that we make sense of reality through stories, if we are both the narrator and a character in our own stories, and that we invite others into our stories by telling them—if all of this is true—we come face-to-face with a very troubling and dark truth. And that truth is this: *We are finite, fallible human sinners who are not capable either of knowing the whole truth or of telling the truth when we do know it.*

⁹Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 47, 52.

¹⁰Roger Schank, *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995) 44.

¹¹Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 217.

¹²Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio (New Series)* 17/4 (2004) 428. It should be noted that although Strawson names this “widespread agreement,” he does not assent to it. I find Strawson’s argument unconvincing for several reasons, the most notable being that Strawson structures his argument “against narrativity” in a classic diatribe, question-and-answer narrative style. In other words, Strawson’s argument is itself, ironically, a narrative.

Because we are in bondage to sin and are finite creatures, as authors who write our own stories about ourselves, we will lie. We will twist the truth to make ourselves look better. We will tell our stories from our own perspectives, which by definition means we cannot see far enough or straight enough to know the truth. We will try to make ourselves look better to ourselves and to our neighbors.

Consider your own story.

Are there parts of your story that you don't want anyone else to know? Are there parts of your story that you wish you could forget? Are there things you did that shame you to remember? In fact, have you tried to lie to yourself about your past? Have you said to yourself or to others, "I didn't really do that. I didn't really mean that. That didn't actually happen that way, did it?"

As a listener I have heard people say things like "I wasn't me when I did that," or "I'm a different person now," or "I didn't know who I was." I have heard people say such things.

I have heard myself saying such things. To myself. And to others.

So we are stuck with this reality as people. We are our own stories. We are both author and character of our stories. But we are neither good enough, wise enough, or true enough to write stories that are both true and good. All of the stories that we tell will, one way or another, fail us. All of our stories are, as Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell saw many years ago, "susceptible of confirming us in a state of self-deception."¹³

We are our stories, but our stories—from both a theological and an ethical perspective—are inevitably inadequate. What then?

We will need a different story. We will need this story to come alongside our stories and be a story that can tell the truth about us without killing us. Or rather, precisely a story that will tell the truth about us and thereby kill us, but also raise us from the dead.

If such a story is to be found, it will have to come from outside of ourselves. In order to be a better story—one that can kill us but yet also give us new life—the story will need to be told by a better narrator. It will need a storyteller *who is truth* and whose perspective is larger than is humanly possible. It will have to be initiated, authored, and told by one wise enough, loving enough, and powerful enough to raise the dead.

As Hauerwas and Burrell wrote, "A true story could only be one powerful enough to check the endemic tendency toward self-deception—a tendency which inadequate stories cannot help but foster. Correlatively, if the true God were to provide us with a saving story, it would have to be one that we found continually discomfiting. For it would be a saving story only as it empowered us to combat the inertial drift into self-deception."¹⁴

¹³Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "Self-Deception and Autobiography: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2/1 (1974) 111.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

God's word does these things—checking our “endemic tendency toward self-deception,” empowering “us to combat the inertial drift into self-deception,” and overcoming our “inadequate stories” with promises that put us to death and raise us up in new life—precisely by offering a narrative that is grander and more true than our individual stories. God's word is grander because it connects us with the larger realities of God's creative, sustaining, and redeeming actions. God's word is more true because rather than trying to cover up sin with justifications, rationalizations, and false narratives, God's word tells the truth about sin.

What other people's stories highlight their sins and imperfections? Rather than cover up their warts and blemishes, the Bible goes to quite a length to tell the hard-to-hear truth about human sin.

Reflect for a moment on how the Bible portrays Abraham, Sarah, the people wandering in the wilderness, David, Peter, Paul, and so on. Abraham, far from being the “great man of faith,” throws Sarah under the bus and into Pharaoh's harem: “Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you” (Gen 12:13). Sarah proves little different, sending her slave Hagar in to have a child with Abraham and then turning on Hagar: “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her” (Gen 16:6). David slept with Uriah's wife Bathsheba and then arranged for Uriah's death in order to cover it up (2 Sam 11:1–17). Immediately after the deliverance at the Sea, the “stiff-necked” people feared they would die of hunger and thirst and so complained: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread” (Exod 16:3). James and John vied to sit at Christ's right and left in the kingdom (Mark 10:35–37). Peter denied Jesus (Mark 14:72). Paul persecuted Christ (Acts 9:4). And so on, and on, and on.

What other people's stories highlight their sins and imperfections? Rather than cover up their warts and blemishes, the Bible goes to quite a length to tell the hard-to-hear truth about human sin. Most cultures tell stories about their heroes or ancestors that glorify them: I cannot tell a lie, I chopped down the cherry tree with my little hatchet. If a story is uncomfortable, it is usually excised from the canon and the culture actively denies the story. But the Bible is different in this regard—the Bible goes out of the way to tell some of the hard stories.

The Bible can do this because it has another word to speak: Your wife shall have a son. I will be your God and you will be my people. Unto us a child is born. He is risen.

In these stories and in the biblical story writ large, God the great storyteller comes alongside of us and offers us a better story. A story that tells us who we really are and makes promises that bestow a new identity on us.

HOW STORIES WORK TO SHAPE INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

As noted, Roger Schank, a cognitive psychologist, writes that we “interpret reality through our stories and open our realities up to others when we tell our stories.”¹⁵ He also argued that “we take the standard stories of our culture and interpret what happens to us in terms of such stories.”¹⁶ That is, these stories provide for us the interpretive cues that help us navigate and make sense of our own experiences. For example, think about Jesus’ powerful parable of the prodigal son. Think about how knowing that story has shaped the relationship between fathers and sons over the centuries. What if I ask you to wonder if the Bible didn’t contain that story? What if the only stories about fathers and sons in the Bible were the story of Jacob fooling his father in order to steal his brother’s blessing and Absalom’s rebellion against David and his eventual death after David prevailed? Without the story of the prodigal son, how many troubled father and son relationships might never have found reconciliation? How many runaways may never have returned home?

The point is rather simple but profound. Stories offer us plots, characters, scenes, locations, and resolutions that we use to interpret new experiences and powerful emotions. These plots, characters, scenes, and locations are archived in human memory and can be accessed in key times and places. When we access these elements of story, they give us hooks on which to hang new moments and frames within which to make sense of some new experience.

In this light, Schank writes that “people need to make sense of their own lives.”¹⁷ Note that “making sense of our lives” is not a luxury or some act of post-Enlightenment individualism. Rather, making sense of our experiences and lives is a fundamental task of being a human.

Story provides one of the key elements that help us achieve this essential human task. “Humans cannot easily digest the complexity of the world where they live and the actions that they and others take in that world.”¹⁸ In order to do so, “we can look for generalizations that we have seen before and that we believe others have seen before.”¹⁹ Stories, of course, store such generalizations quite powerfully. Or, as Annette Simmons has written, “People float in an ocean of data and disconnected facts that overwhelm them with choices” and “Stories interpret raw facts and proofs to create reality. Change the story and you change the meaning of the facts.”²⁰

¹⁵Schank, *Tell Me a Story*, 44.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁸Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, “Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story,” in *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story*, ed. Robert S. Wyer, Jr. (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995) 63.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins: How to Use Your Own Stories to Communicate with Power and Impact* (New York: American Management Association, 2007) 5, 3–4.

THE NARRATIVE OF SCRIPTURE AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Although Schank and many of the thinkers cited above are not theologians, the theories with which I have been interacting apply powerfully to the work of Christian faith formation. This is true whether one is reflecting on faith that is born in the hearts of the children that Christians are raising in their own homes (Christian nurture and faith formation) or in the hearts of the strangers that are invited into the community of faith (Christian evangelism and faith formation).

the goal of faith formation is to cultivate in a person's heart a faith that clings to Jesus Christ and looks to him for all good things

The goal of faith formation is to cultivate in a person's heart a faith that clings to Jesus Christ and looks to him for all good things. Christian faith is notoriously hard to define, but one critical insight about faith is absolutely essential: faith in Jesus Christ includes *a particular identity—the identity of “Christian.”* If the focus is the young, then the issue is how best to nurture a “Christian identity” in the young. If the focus is the stranger, then the issue is how best to foster a new “Christian identity” in the stranger. Either way, faith in Jesus requires a formation, or transformation and alteration, of one's self-definition. Every attempt to come to terms with what Christian faith is must seriously consider the nature of this change of identity. The church has expressed this identity change in many ways through the ages. But, as in all things, the poets, playing the English language as though it were a massive pipe organ, do the best job of getting at this matter. I once was lost, they say, but now I am found. I once was blind, but now I see. Once we were no people, now we are God's people. We were dead in our sins, now we live in Christ's forgiveness. We were slaves, now we're free, free indeed. We were in darkness, now we live in Christ's light and indeed we are so bold as to proclaim that we are the light of the world because Christ's light shines in us. We once were far from God, but in Christ, God has come near to us. Christian faith means that something about our very identity is different than if we were not Christians.

Faith formation is, at its heart, about this other identity of “Christian.” A person who did not consider herself a child of God now says, “I am a child of God.” A person who did not conceive of himself as beloved of God now says, “I am loved by God.” A person suffering under the guilt of sin now says, “In Jesus Christ, my sins are forgiven.” Evangelism amounts to defragging the hard drive of one's soul. It is the rewiring of the spiritual circuit board. It is retuning all the piano strings of one's heart.

When someone once evangelized each of us, what that person wanted each of us to know was that joy and the love and the peace that comes with that new identity.

The point of this essay has been to reflect on what sort of thing “human identity” is. It has been argued, based on a brief survey of interdisciplinary thinking, that human identity is *inherently narrative*. We are our stories. As Schank writes, “We define ourselves through our own stories, but through teaching (and preaching) we also define ourselves through the stories of others. . . . good storytellers know how to take advantage of this basic human need to define oneself through the stories other people live.”²¹

If this conclusion is right, then one essential task for an evangelizing, faith-forming, missional church is to do a much better job than we have done in recent decades of telling God’s story. Because there is a crisis. We live in an age that has forgotten God’s story—all the way from Abraham and Moses, to Jesus, to Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Augustine, Luther, and Joan of Arc and all the grand stories of the church. In such an age, forming faith in others will require that we return to a very intentional telling of God’s story.

Is it the only thing we must do? Of course not. Is it a panacea, a smooth stone with which we can slay the giant of secular unbelief? Of course not. But telling the old, old story is one of the things we must do.

The church used to be able to rely on a wide variety of cultural co-tellers who helped teach the Christian story. These cultural co-tellers used to include the public school system, the artists on stage and screen, and the print and radio media. All of those cultural tellers have now moved on and no longer support the church in the basic act of telling the biblical and Christian story. What then? The church itself must focus its ministry in order to tell the old, old story in this new, new time.

As Richard Bauckham has written, “The church must be constantly retelling the story, never losing sight of the landmark events, never losing touch with the main lines of theological meaning in Scripture’s own tellings and commentaries, always remaining open to the never exhausted potential of the texts in their resonances with contemporary life.”²² ⊕

ROLF A. JACOBSON is associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. A frequent contributor to Word & World, Jacobson’s voice can be heard weekly on two podcasts: “Sermon Brainwave” and “I Love the Tell the Story” [called “Narrative Lectionary” on iTunes]. His most recent book is Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader’s Guide for Discovery and Engagement, with Karl N. Jacobson (Baker Academic, 2013).

²¹Roger Schank, *Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory* (New York: Scribner, 1990) 218.

²²Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 44.