practical matters

Learning and Living the Story: Religious Literacy for Youth through Narrative Imagination

Frank Rogers

ABSTRACT

Grounded in an extended example of an African-American Church that uses stories and drama to educate its youth about their cultural and religious heritage, this article describes how narrative can nurture religious literacy for young people. Though there are many approaches to narrative pedagogy, the primary purpose of this approach is to teach young people to be fluent in the core symbols and images through which their community interprets experience, which provides grounding for cultural identity in their faith tradition, theological and ethical reflection, and participation in the stories themselves. The author outlines five educational movements to use story and narrative imagination to teach religious literacy.

The Reverend Doctor Joshua Caleb Helton III served as pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal for thirty-two years. An original freedom rider as a seminary student, Pastor Helton was a seasoned field operative in the Civil Rights Movement before migrating west to shepherd a church in the heart of South Central Los Angeles. He found the church besieged: riots had decimated the community; poverty and nihilism ran rampant. And yet, with the prophetic force of Moses, and Aaron's administrative acumen, Pastor Helton transformed a rag-tag remnant of the faithful into a beacon of power and hope. The church soon housed a career center, a college preparatory program, an affordable housing alliance, a children's school, and a leadership academy. In three decades, Bethel AME became both a thriving congregation and a fixture in the African-American community. Ever dressed in his three-piece suits, his shoes polished, handker-

Practical Matters, January 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1-16.

chief creased, and tie knot crisp and cinched with a pin, Pastor Helton stood tall at the helm. He was the congregation's captain. He was beloved. And now, hastened by heart surgery, he was stepping down.

The congregation knew that nothing but the perfect farewell tribute would do, and they knew where to start—with Pastor Helton's unwavering commitment to youth. For three decades, Pastor Helton had conducted each year's confirmation process. He used a simple teaching strategy: he told stories of his days in the Civil Rights Movement, stories of forbearers who fought through slavery, stories reaching back to biblical ancestors. Young people needed to know who they were, where they came from, and the people who make one proud to be an African-American Christian. As part of the confirmation process, each teen had to find one historical figure she or he particularly admired. The participants in the confirmation process studied these persons, distilled their legacies, and identified their most ennobling qualities. Then on Confirmation Sunday, as the teenagers confirmed their faith and claimed the community as their own, they named their patron role models and claimed them as their guides through the bayous of adulthood.

With Pastor Helton derailed by ill health, the church commissioned Yolanda Jones to take over the confirmation class. Once again, the teens would learn stories from their heritage and choose one historical figure to study in more detail. But they also gathered stories from the congregation. They consulted with the choir and studied Negro Spirituals. Then they crafted a play that both confirmed their faith and commemorated the genius of Pastor Helton's legacy. This Confirmation Sunday promised to be unlike any other.

In the pages that follow, I describe the events of that Confirmation Sunday, specifically the creation of a play by the youth of the church that draws on the narratives of various African-American historical figures as well as exemplary members of the church itself. In the following sections, I draw on the detailed portrayal of this play as an example in a theoretical discussion of the power of narrative pedagogy for fostering religious literacy within both the community of Bethel AME specifically and religious communities generally. I conclude by discussing five educational movements of narrative pedagogy for religious literacy.

Decked out as usual, the guest of honor made his first congregational appearance since the surgery that sidelined him. The cheering crowd stood until a young man took center stage and introduced the afternoon's program: a freedom ride through African-American history. As the curtains part, the stage reveals a vandalized bus turned over on its side. Rubble surrounds it. Sounds of a riot shriek offstage. Cautiously, a group of teenagers crawls out and surveys the damage.

"Whoa, look what they did to our ride," one youth wails at the overturned bus.

One teen counts the group. "Say, where's Sonny?"

They glance around. "They got him already," an angry Torrance despairs. "I'm telling you, it's hopeless." Shots fire again, sirens squeal. The teens, all but Torrance, scurry to the bus's undercarriage and cower.

As the young people crouch in fear, a plaintive voice cries from backstage. Against the gauze-

veiled backdrop, a train's silhouette eases by. Its lone passenger sings:

This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train is bound for glory, hop on board and hear the story,
This train is bound for glory, this train.

Only one young woman hears the song, and she slips away toward it. As she nears the backdrop, the train stops. The passenger, an elderly woman dressed in a nineteenth-century frock and shawl, passes through the veil. Smiling, she pulls off her shawl and drapes it around the young woman's shoulders. Somewhat mystified, the girl returns to the others huddled against the bus. One of them notices and asks about her shawl.

"It's the weirdest thing," the young woman contemplates. "Harriett Tubman just came to me, like in a vision. I think she came to help us."

"Who's Harriett Tubman?" one teen asks.

The young woman mulls it over. Then she tells Tubman's story: how Tubman escaped from slavery and organized the network of safe-houses that comprised the Underground Railroad; how she returned to the south and rescued her sister and nieces, then returned many times more, teaching spirituals that hid codes to follow; how she evaded captors through wading in the waters, keeping an eye on the north star, and like Moses before her, freeing over three hundred of her people from slavery and inspiring countless more.

The others take in her story. But once its spell recedes, confusion descends. "How's that going to help us here?" someone asks.

"I don't know," the young woman concedes. "But I think she's telling us, if she could do it, we can…we can make a train to freedom."

"We tried that once," Torrance quips while digging through debris. "Look where it got us. Anyone who's tired of bedtime stories help me look for Sonny."

"Well, I've got to try," says the girl in Tubman's shawl. She walks to the back side of the bus. "Anyone gonna help me?"

The young people sit in indecision; shots decide it for them. They race around and bury themselves in the trash piles. The young woman stands tall. Oblivious to the gunfire pings, she pushes, determined to right the bus herself. Behind the veil, the song returns, a duet now, a man and woman singing in mournful tandem as the train glides across the backdrop.

This train is bound for glory, this train…

The play repeats the pattern established with Harriet Tubman's story with other historical figures. As Harriett Tubman waits on the train, Frederick Douglass comes onto the stage and gives one youth his coat; Sojourner Truth passes on her African head wrap; a young man dons Thurgood

Marshall's judicial cloak. The teens receive each of these articles of clothing from the historical figures, commissioned then to relate to their friends the stories of these dignitaries of African-American history. The other teens stand spellbound by the stories, then befuddled as to their meanings. Torrance continues to search for Sonny. Another teen tells of Rosa Parks; another of Ruby Bridges. One by one, the stories come out. One by one, the Freedom Train's song grows louder. One by one, the group with their shoulders to the overturned bus gains strength in a concerted effort to right it. One by one, the figures board the train with Harriet Tubman. And the Freedom Train backstage passes by again and again and again. But the school bus does not budge. And neither does Torrance. Until his shout ends the momentum.

"I found him!" Peeling off debris from a pile, Torrance lays bare a teenager's body. "It's Sonny." The others rush over. "And he's alive!" As the teens tend to him, Torrance fumes to the side. "See!" he exclaims. "They're trying to kill us and all you can do is tell stories." He kicks an overturned trash can, grabs a length of pipe, and takes a swing at the bus. Behind the veiled backdrop, the Freedom Train returns. This time, Torrance hears it. He skeptically nears the veil, where he sees a mysterious man who has joined the other passengers. The man places his glasses on the boy's eyes, and Torrance sees. He returns to his friends and tells them, "Malcolm came to me. He wants me to tell his story." The story takes Torrance to a fever pitch. "You guys are right," he blazes. "We can refuse oppression. We can ride away to a Mecca of dignity. Let's get this bus back on its tracks."

His words inspire the others. They lean into the vehicle and shove without result. The Freedom Train rolls by again, and it revives Sonny with its music. He hobbles toward the curtain. A new figure slips through the veil and fits Sonny with his suit jacket and a Nobel medal. The train passes on, and Sonny walks dazedly to the still straining group. They notice him and rush over.

"Who this time?"

"It was Dr. Martin Luther King."

"What did he say?" they ask.

Sonny tells King's story, culminating with the observation, "That was his dream—that one day we'll live in a world where *all* God's children are one. We can live it now. We can resist violence and love our oppressors into goodness. We can right this bus and ride it all the way to the Beloved Community Martin Luther King dared imagine. Let's go."

The others, encouraged, bolt to the bus. This time, they feel it; they have the power. They shove harder. The bus lifts ever so slightly. With the force of history, they shove even harder. A foot off the ground, the bus hovers for a second, then crashes back down with a leaden thump. With all their strength, they simply cannot do it. Torrance kicks the ground. The teens feel defeated. Their stories seem dead in the dust.

Then it comes. From the back of the auditorium, a lone plaintive baritone voice bellows as if singing from the grave:

When Israel was in Egypt's land,

Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go."

The soloist walks up the aisle. All turn to see a young man dressed to the nines—a tailored three-piece suit, polished shoes, tie crisply knotted and cinched with a pin. Everyone gets it instantly: Pastor Helton has entered the building, and he's singing his signature song. When the music fades, the pastor inquires, "What's going on?"

"Man, we're stuck in this ghetto and our bus has been trashed. We can't get it back on its feet."

"What're you using for muscle?"

"That's just it," Torrance says. "All we got is our imagination...stories."

"Well," Pastor Helton considers, "stories and imagination can be mighty powerful things. I rode on a bus much like this one, through some pretty mean places too. And all I had were the stories that people passed on to me. We came into a place as bad as this, took those stories, and through our imagination built ourselves a Freedom Train, right here in the ghetto. And you know who was on that train? Harriett Tubman. Now she didn't go by Ms. Harriett Tubman, no. Her name was Martha Simpson." As he mentions her name, the real Martha Simpson—a middle-aged woman from the church—walks on stage humming, "This train is bound for glory, this train." The teen playing Pastor Helton continues by connecting Martha Simpson's story to Harriett Tubman. He calls on other individuals in the congregation and relates their stories to those of the other historical figures on the Freedom Train. They come on stage, humming in chorus with the others: the single mother that started the Sojourner Truth Shelter for Women, the janitor who studied law by night and is now a superior court judge, the x-ray nurse who refused to leave when unjustly dismissed from her job, and the schoolteacher who stayed in South Central to teach Black Studies at the church youth academy. By now the youthful Pastor Helton is all but preaching over the music. "Do you see them? Those stories are who we can become if we see ourselves with the eyes of faith."

"But they're still just stories," Torrance protests. "How do they help us lift up a bus?"

"The stories are your strength," Pastor Helton proclaims. "Look around you. You've got Harriett Tubman shouldering that bus." He points at the young woman in the shawl. "You've got Frederick Douglass here, Ruby Bridges, why you've got both Malcolm and Martin. If they can't raise this bus, nobody can."

The teens' sheepishness betrays their shame. "But you've got us all wrong," the girl wearing the shawl reveals. "I'm not really Harriett Tubman." She takes the shawl off. "I'm just Tiffany. I'm

in the ninth grade."

Pastor Helton eyes Tiffany as he walks up to her, puts Harriett Tubman's shawl back onto her shoulders, and says, "Oh…but you *are* Harriett Tubman. Her blood runs through your veins." He turns to each of the other teens and confirms that these heroes dwell in their souls, feed their dreams, and make them strong. Emboldened by the growing chorus behind them, the teens shoulder the bus once more. As the music mounts, they heave. The bus nudges. The music gets louder. The bus inches upward. The music breaks free. And in a mighty burst of power, the bus stands up and the teens cheer.

But the cheer is short-lived. The bus is in no condition to be driven. Buoyed by the music, the teens get to work. Everyone on stage pitches in, and a miracle of restoration occurs. By the end, the bus looks like a cross between an electric trolley car and a blues band's luxury coach: the seats are new and plush, the sides are bright as if freshly painted, marquee lights trim the edges, and the teens' historical props—the shawls and coats, glasses and gowns—now span the wall in a mural commemorating the liberative heritage that sustains them. The sign across the top names the bus well—FREEDOM TRAIN BOUND FOR GLORY.

The youth ecstatically take their seats within the bus as the chorus recedes to the back. The young Pastor Helton watches from the side as proud as the Maker beholding the first day of creation.

"Come on," one girl yells. "We're ready to go." Pastor Helton nods knowingly. "What's the matter? We need to get out of here." She points to the conspicuously empty conductor's seat.

"I'm not coming with you," Pastor Helton reveals.

"What do you mean? You're our driver. You're the only one who knows the way."

Smiling, Pastor Helton tells the group that they don't need him anymore; they have everything they need already. From backstage, the song begins again, its mournful tone contrasting with the jubilation of moments before. Behind the veil, the Freedom Train eases into view, filled with history's heroes. Pastor Helton explains that the train has come for him. As the teens watch aghast, the pastor takes his place at the end of the waiting train. The train resumes its journey and moves out of sight.

The teens gaze wistfully at the train's wake, but shots snap their sorrow short. As panic returns, they search each other out. The conductor's seat remains absent. "Quick," one teen yells. "We gotta get outta here. Who's gonna drive the bus?"

Like an eager recruit clueless to danger, a five-year-old cries out from the audience, *"I'll drive it!"* The crowd chuckles but the boy is dead serious. Standing on his daddy's lap, he is ready for action. Sonny improvises.

"You will, will you?"

"Sure I will."

"Well… do you know the song?"

Without waiting to be asked again, the precocious child starts right in. Other children join the

chorus. With Sonny's wave, the whole spontaneous choir rushes the stage. Soon children hang from the bus's side, pile on the teenagers' laps, and cram into the cab. "Okay…, let's get out of here. Let's ride this train to freedom."

The five-year-old boy, now sitting on Sonny's lap, turns the key. Nothing happens. He turns it again. Still nothing. Shots fire from offstage as the violence approaches. Sonny dashes out to the engine. He lifts up a handful of wires. "I hate to say it, but this bus is too far gone."

Just then, a young man with a pipe runs onto stage. When he sees Sonny, he wields it like a baseball bat. A handful of teens leap off the bus and surround the would-be assailant. "It's the guy that beat up Sonny," one yells. As Sonny recognizes him, rage fills his eyes. He raises the wires to use as whips. The two circle each other poised to attack. Then Torrance steps off the bus dragging the pipe he salvaged earlier.

"I get it now," he says. "Why the bus won't start. We're not supposed to flee to the Promised Land. We're supposed to build the Promised Land right here." Torrance worms through the crowd and addresses it from within. "Look," he says pointing to the thug. "He's just like us—clawing for the same thing—peace, dignity, a table of food, and a family to enjoy it with." He looks at the thug as he lays his pipe on the ground. "This isn't the way," he continues. He sidles over to Sonny, takes the wires from Sonny's hands and tosses them onto the ground as well. "We just want to be free—free from violence, free from fear, free to be the family God created us to be."

The thug ponders with his pipe still poised for attack. Torrance approaches him, cautiously reaches up, and disarms him of the pipe. Then he bends to the ground and, using the wires as binding, fits the pipes to form a cross. "We're starting a church," he tells the thug. "What d'ya say? Ride with us to freedom." He opens his arms and embraces him. The thug tentatively eyes Sonny, who watches as Torrance releases the thug and steps aside. Then too, Sonny relents.

"Yeah," he says, "Ride with us to freedom." Setting their hostility aside, the two embrace with conviction. As Sonny and the thug hold each other tight, a spotlight shines through the veil. Looking down from his perch as if an angel on high, the young Pastor Helton watches approvingly. Then he sings. As the spiritual meanders through the scene, Torrance hands a teen on the bus the cross stitched from weapons. He plants it front and center, then fastens an addendum. FREEDOM TRAIN BOUND FOR GLORY now has a name…BETHEL AME CHURCH. They sing their proclamation, and their prayer:

This train is bound for glory, join with us and live the story,
This train is bound for glory, this train.

Theoretical Underpinnings

For Pastor Helton, faith is a freedom ride. Being an African-American Christian means being part of a history, a movement that has traveled through time. Born of dignified origins, a people

have labored toward a promised land of peace and prosperity. Repeatedly, they have found themselves pummeled and enslaved by oppressors, but they have not been vanquished. Along the way, luminaries have arisen who have reminded them of their original dignity and restored their guiding hope. This movement through history defines the African-American Christian. To be one of them is to join them on the Freedom Train. One cannot hop on board, however, unless one sees the train and knows the story.

Pastor Helton and Yolanda Jones's teaching practices exemplify a *religious literacy* approach to narrative pedagogy.[1] Their primary purpose is to teach African American young people to be fluent in the core symbols and images through which their community interprets experience.[2] When the leaders of Bethel AME have a "dream" that their neighborhood flourish with justice and peace, they want their youth to know the nuances of meaning that this dream entails. They want them to know of its roots in both Martin Luther King's dream, and the Israelite's vision of the Promised Land. Such literacy is essential for full communal participation. Otherwise, the convictions and themes that define a community have no meaning, and the guiding images that inspire the community have no power. One cannot fully join a community without knowing the language.

Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, after conducting the largest ever study of teens and religion, find that the vast majority of North American young people are "*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith…and its meaning or place in their lives."[3] Teenagers are seldom cognizant of their faith community's core convictions let alone capable of embodying them within their world. Yet adolescence is usually the time when young people are invited to affirm their religious heritage and claim their faith community as their own. During communal rites of passage such as confirmation and bar and bat mitzvah, teens are expected to learn about their religious tradition more fully and to make some form of mature public profession of their faith. Affirming one's faith implies knowing its contours; and claiming one's community implies knowing that community's identity.

Pastor Helton and Yolanda Jones show that narrative and imagination exhibit unique promise in nurturing religious literacy. At its most basic level, given their power to engage the imagination, stories communicate religious heritage in an unusually effective way—stories remain with people long after didactic content has dissipated. More than that, the process by which a community knows and owns its faith tradition is intrinsically narrative in structure. Knowing a community entails learning that community's story, and joining a community entails making that story one's own.

Why are stories so effective for teaching religious literacy?

First, *religious communities treasure some stories as intrinsically transformative*. Like precious jewels whose sparkling beauty bestow delight, certain stories are treasured by a faith community. Beholding them renews the soul and sustains hope. Pastor Helton did not tell random or simply amusing folktales but stories that are uniquely liberative within his religious culture. Narrative theologian Gabriel Fackre calls these "canonical stories," narratives that have paradigmatic

authority for a community's sense of identity, integrity, and purpose. They are the community's functionally sacred stories. In the Christian tradition, such stories include the death and resurrection of Jesus, his birth, the parables he told, the story of Creation, the Exodus, and so forth. Other stories also function with communal authority, such as the stories of Christian exemplars.[4] For Bethel AME, the biographies of Harriett Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King embody authentic faith and spark a similar faith among hearers in the present. Stories of resistance and emancipation during slavery are sacred, as are those of the Montgomery bus boycott, the march on Selma, and the triumph of love in the face of hatred within the boiling cauldron of Birmingham. When remembering these stories, the dignity of a people is reclaimed, faith in a God of justice is renewed, and the resolve to fight for freedom is emboldened.

Second, stories effectively convey religious literacy because *narrative substantively constitutes the content of religious faith*. The content of Christian faith is a story of God's relationship with the world, the hope toward which that God invites all of creation, and the ways this cosmic storyline plays out today. Doctrine alone deadens; narrative enlivens. God is not known in theological abstractions but in the blood and marrow of living events.

Christian theological reflection is unmoored speculation unless grounded in a story. What "salvation" means, for example, is rooted in the narrative of how God saved the world through the historical events of Jesus and his Jewish ancestors. To the extent that Christian communities continue to experience God's saving work in the present, an articulated doctrine of salvation must "ring true" with these stories as well. Bethel AME experiences a God who saved an ancient people from slavery, who inspired an Underground Railroad when slavery appeared again, who empowered a weary seamstress, who emboldened an elementary school kid, and who commissioned a Baptist preacher to fight for the civil rights of the oppressed. These stories have authority. The community knows them to be true. Their doctrine of salvation, therefore, will derive from and elaborate upon these sacred narratives. More than simply rescuing souls, for example, salvation for Bethel AME includes a people's liberation from oppression, their claim of human dignity, and their dream that God will restore the bonds that racism has rent asunder.[5] Teaching a theological concept divorced from these tap-root narratives not only deadens pedagogy, it obscures the essential meaning found only within the stories.

Similarly, moral precepts depend on narrative.[6] What grounds the ancient Israelite ethical command to show hospitality to the stranger? Political expediency? Geographical necessity? No. The command emerges from and only has meaning within the narrative of God's hospitality when the Israelites were strangers in Egypt (see Ex. 23:9). Ethical deliberation entails determining what actions are "fitting" within the story by which a community is called to live. The teens of Bethel AME engaged in precisely this type of reflection. How should they respond to the thug that threatens them? Their tradition's stories tell them how. In sum, one knows a faith tradition when one has absorbed its canonical stories, when these stories become the soil from which one's theological reflection springs forth, and when they provide the narrative framework that defines faithful

behavior.

The third theoretical underpinning supporting the narrative structure of religious literacy goes beyond religious communities treasuring sacred stories and beyond these stories grounding the substantive content of religious faith. For *narrative constitutes religious communities themselves*. The glue that binds a people's collective identity is the story of their common journey toward a shared goal. In essence, communities *are* stories. Consequently, religious literacy—fluency with the language a community shares—includes knowing the narratives that constitute that particular community's core identity. A community is "Christian" neither because of the doctrines it espouses nor because of the precepts it advocates. It is Christian because of a shared self-understanding—nurtured by ritual, proclamation, and educational reflection—that this group of people is part of this grand story and that together they seek to participate in that story ever more faithfully.[7]

Story defines life together in the community of Bethel AME. Its people share a "cosmic narrative." As Christians and African Americans, they look to the same origins—the Chosen Ones of Israel, the church called by Jesus, the African homeland from which they were exiled; they plot their people's decisive events along a common cosmic storyline—Exodus, slavery, emancipation, segregation, civil rights; and they quest for a common sense of the Good—a promised land, a dream of freedom and dignity, of prosperity and peaceful coexistence.

A shared "communal narrative" also unites the people of Bethel AME. They are the people called into being by a charismatic civil rights pastor, continually discerning what the Promised Land looks like in contemporary South Central LA and wrestling together to embody their dream. The luminaries who have lit up their past guide them. The people of Bethel AME are constituted by the stories of Martha Simpson laying the rails of Harriett Tubman within the slavery of gang violence; Steven Jackson treading the track of Frederick Douglass within a biased city government; Pastor Helton extending the ride of Martin and Malcolm through an urban ghetto; and all of the other present-day parishioners who join their pioneering ancestral companions on the same campaign. Bethel AME is a Freedom Train, and its core communal identity is the story of how this train has sometimes lumbered and sometimes raced toward the land promised by God. The genius of Bethel's confirmation process lies in its recognition of their narrative communal identity and their imaginative embrace of it for themselves, individually.

The Five Educational Movements of Narrative Pedagogy for Religious Literacy

Given the power of story to teach a tradition, religious literacy approaches to narrative pedagogy seek to do three things:

1. They help people learn the core stories that form the heritage and identity of their particular faith tradition.
2. They enable theological and ethical reflection grounded in these stories.

3. They encourage people to join the story—to internalize these stories as their own.

Religious educators have long recognized the centrality of stories in passing along a community's heritage. One educator, youth minister Sarah Arthur, specifically addresses narrative's contribution to the religious literacy of Christian adolescents.[8] Arthur is convinced that post-modernism, with its obliteration of communal meta-narratives and its corrosive radical relativity, leaves teenagers starved for transcendence while skeptical toward religious traditions they know little about. With nothing else feeding them, teens flock with religious devotion to such transcendent epics as *The Matrix* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Arthur wants "to impart Biblical and theological content to young people"[9] in ways that captivate their imagination. She recognizes not only that Christianity is a storied tradition, but also that all communities transmit through story what really matters to the next generation.

Observing that media-saturated teens think more in images than concepts and that a good story has the power to entrance even the most over-stimulated junior high-schooler, Arthur calls for youth ministers to claim their role as *bards*, "poets charged with the task of keeping and imparting the stories, language, values, and beliefs of a culture,"[10] in ways that invite youth into the story-telling tradition of Christianity. Toward that end, Arthur invites leaders of youth to tell stories, lots of them, with the passion of people who love and believe them. She lifts up confirmation as the opportune time to teach young people the cosmic storyline of the Bible as a whole—"the narrative portrait of who God is"[11] —and how that narrative arc continues throughout the Christian tradition.

Anne Wimberley, working with African-American communities, also recognizes the power of story in transmitting a tradition and shaping personal and communal identity.[12] She invites persons to reflect on their personal stories that constitute their everyday lives and to assess the extent to which one's personal life story is liberating or deadening. Then she links these stories to narratives from Christian and African-American traditions, inviting persons to reframe their personal story through the liberative lens of these faith stories. This story-linking process empowers persons to live storylines that participate in God's vision of wholeness and liberation.

So how do you use story and narrative imagination to teach religious literacy? The essential method of a religious literacy approach to narrative pedagogy has five distinctive educational movements.

First, *choose stories for teens to engage in any given session or program*. Which stories depends upon the audience for which the event or program is designed, the specific purposes therein, and the particular collection of stories most important for their community. Draw from *canonical stories* (exemplary biographies, revelatory moments within the tradition, along with specific narratives within the community's sacred writings); *cosmic stories* (meta-narrative arcs that frame history as an ongoing storyline whether spanning the Bible as a whole, the development of the Christian tradition, or the historical movement of a particular religious culture like African-American Christianity); and *communal stories* (those local narratives that shape the identity of a particular congregation or religious community). The stories may be selected by the educator or

by the learners encouraged to discover such stories for themselves. At Bethel AME, both methods occurred. Pastor Helton carried a satchel of stories from which he shared some decisive ones, but he also empowered the confirmands to research other stories that inform African-American Christian identity.

Second, *help the youth experience the story as a story*. Part of the power of stories to seep into the soul's memory and lay claim to one's identity is their ability to entrance—to transport people into the narrative world where characters are palpable, settings are tangible, and experiences are brought to life. Consequently, it is essential to share the stories in aesthetically compelling ways. Oral storytelling is a start, but other narrative art forms are available as well. Films like *The Prince of Egypt* or *Godspell* engagingly dramatize religious narratives while others like *Bonhoeffer* or *Eyes on the Prize* compellingly portray liberative historical moments. Books, like Walt Wangerin's *The Book of God*, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, or Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, bear similar power.[13] Mark Miller advocates extended simulations of Biblical stories in which the youth "re-live" such narrative episodes as the Creation, the Sermon on the Mount, the Last Supper, or the death and resurrection of Jesus.[14] Reader's Theater, scripted skits, poetry, mime, and graphic novels are other possibilities. Pastor Helton simply shared his stories from his soul, and yet they could hush a handful of breathtaken teenagers. Whichever you choose, share the story with all of its captivating power.

Third, *reflect on the story*. Experience alone is not education; reflection separates education from entertainment. Reflection can be nurtured in both formal and informal settings—in discussion groups and through writing prompts, or during casual coffee hour conversation after worship or while painting scenery for a confirmation play. One can imagine Pastor Helton, for example, as he's buttoning his robes on Confirmation Sunday, looking over at the teen rehearsing her biographical statement and inquiring, "Tell me again, what is it about Rosa Parks you so admire?" Yet whether we do it formally or informally, we aim to cultivate four types of reflection:[15]

1. *Reflection that deepens understanding of the story*. After telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked his listener, "Which of the three do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the bandit's hand?" (Lk. 10:36). Jesus wanted to ensure that the lawyer not only *heard* the story, but that he *understood* its narrative world. This type of reflection cements details, explores motivations, and insures that the audience noticed the story's nuances. Pastor Helton may have asked, "How was Dr. King's response to his attacker different from the Black mob's?"

2. *Reflection that surfaces one's personal connections with the story.* This type of reflection is oriented around a listener's unique experience of the story—the feelings generated, the desires kindled, and the characters with whom one specifically identifies. To facilitate this, Pastor Helton might ask, "With whom in the story do you most identify? How did the assailant's attack make you feel? What would you do if attacked like Dr.

King?"

3. *Reflection that draws out the story's conceptual possibilities.* This includes discerning and articulating theological and ethical insights embedded within authoritative stories, understanding how abstract concepts and moral principles are incarnated in narrative experience, and relating conceptual insights from different authoritative stories. Pastor Helton would illustrate such reflection by asking questions like, "Where is God in this story? What does Dr. King's story reveal about human brokenness, the nature of love, and the complexities of forgiveness? How is Dr. King's response like or unlike Jesus' response to those who assaulted him?"

4. *Reflection that interprets contemporary experience through the story's lenses*. Growing in faith entails the interpretive practice of seeing and responding to the world from within the symbolic framework of a community's constitutive stories. Pastor Helton could nurture this interpretive reflection by asking, "Where is such assault happening in our world, and how are we tempted to lynch? What would it look like to dream King's dream and respond in a way similarly inspired?"

Fourth, *deepen knowledge of the story by helping the young person retell it as a story of their own creation*. One learns a tradition's stories best when one makes that story one's own through creatively retelling them. Pastor Helton recognized this insight. He not only exposed his youth to liberative stories; he invited them to research and re-present one such story, an exemplar's biography, with which the teen particularly connected. Yolanda Jones took this practice one step further when she invited the confirmation class to craft an original play that portrayed the heritage their pastor so deeply cherished. As ideas flashed and plotlines solidified, the young people generated insights and internalized the stories. "Hey," one teen must have exclaimed along the way, "let's frame the whole thing as a Freedom Ride—that's what it is anyway." "I've got an idea," another teen may have blurted, "the choir's singing can help us lift the bus." "Wait, we can end it with Bethel becoming the Freedom Train—wouldn't that be cool?" And on it goes. Energy swells, meaning is generated, and stories are internalized ever more deeply when writing a play rather than merely watching someone else's.

You can nurture this process in a variety of ways, some simple, some elaborate, some amusing, some profound.[16] For example:

<u>*Storytelling*</u>. Invite youth to retell stories in various ways and contexts. This practice can be as straightforward as sharing a Biblical tale at worship like a storyteller of old, or as playful and creative as a camp activity retelling a story from the point of view of a different character (the Prodigal Son parable from the perspective of the dad, or the brother, or the swine), placing it in a different setting (in high school, outer space, Middle-earth), crafting

it in a different genre (as a newspaper article, a Michael Moore documentary, an episode from "24"), or extending the story a frame further (answering, "What happened the morning after the party?").

Drama. Using drama can be as simple as the role-play of a parable in a youth group meeting or playing the original feature-length production of "Christ's Passion in the 21st Century," or "The Complete Bible: The Director's Cut," or indeed, "God's Freedom Ride through African-American History." Of course, such productions require research, the results of which youth internalize when crafting a narrative portrayal.

Film. Borrow a parent's video camera and invite teens to make a movie instead of an original play; or film an oral history of parishioners remembering the sacred stories that frame the community's identity. In both cases, have a community-wide "World Premiere."

Songs. Invite the teens to rewrite the Jonah story to the tune of Gilligan's Island, or as a Christian Rap; or let the musicians form a band and compose a concert on the history of their heritage through music.

Experiential Multi-Sensory Immersion. Mark Miller has demonstrated the promise and power of simulation events in which teens "re-live" Biblical narratives.[17] These are more powerful still if teens themselves create rather than simply experience them. Stories become internalized through re-creation.

Fifth, *encourage young people to live the story within their particular world.* Pastor Helton longs for his teens to be captured by these stories' power and to embody their liberative vision. "Where is God calling you to be Harriet Tubman today?" is the thrust of his teaching. "What cattle car of teen experience needs hitching to the Freedom Train through history?" "What is our invitation in laying down the rails?" For Pastor Helton knows that youth do not fully these stories until they live their storylines. After reflection upon and internalization of their community's constitutive stories, the fifth movement of religious literacy encourages young people to explore their own contexts and engage them in ways that embody these stories' vision.

How might the youth perpetuate the story they have joined? Here, they imagined how the Freedom Train seeks to roll through today and stepped into the personages of those who have kept that train rolling throughout history. These youth were invited to *be* the story that they have internalized. Yet they also found their own identity taking form from within the roles their ancestors have played before them. For the paradoxical faith claim is this: the more one steps into the power of these stories, the more these stories unleash the power within young people. "You *are* Harriet Tubman," Pastor Helton insists, not because this teenager, Tiffany, has channeled a nineteenth-century

legend, but because some of that legend's gifts *really do* live within the soul of this particular teenager. As Tiffany involves herself in the same story Tubman lived—as she dreams the same dreams, grieves the same hardships, feeds from the same hopes, and fights for the same cause of freedom—she will discover a spirit within her, like Tubman did before, that can liberate the oppressed through her own unique gifts and character. In being Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and Jeremiah, Hagar, Miriam, and Moses, youth will find their own place in the ongoing story that God is living in the world. And they will, indeed, be religiously literate, in the full embodied sense of the term.

Notes

1 Religious Literacy is but one form of narrative pedagogy. Sarah Arthur, *The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Post-Modern Youth* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2007) is a representative example of this form. There are, however, six other approaches to narrative pedagogy, each with a representative theorist. Narrative Pedagogy can nurture Personal Identity (Anne Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African-American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004)), Depth Reflection (Peter Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama* (Los Angeles, CA: Alef Design Group, 1998)), Critical Reflection (Jack Zipes, *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995)), Soul Truth (Dori Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Woman* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005)), Creative Vitality (Daniel Judah Sklar, *Playmaking: Children Creating and Performing their own Plays* (New York, NY: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1991)), or Social Empowerment (Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Theater Communications Group, 1993)). Each of these are delineated in my forthcoming book *Finding God in the Graffiti: Narrative Pedagogy with Young People* of which the current article is an adaptation of but one chapter.

2 Stephen Prothero defines religious literacy as "the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives." Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2007), 11-12.

3 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131, emphasis included.

4 James McClendon, *Biography as Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).

5 See Michael Root, "The Narrative Structure of Soteriology," in *Why Narrative?*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 263-278.

6 See particularly Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy, The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and James McClendon, *Biography as Theology*.

7 The church's "most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in Scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story." Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1.

8 Sarah Arthur, *The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Post-Modern Youth* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2007).

9 Arthur, *God-Hungry*, 2.

10 Arthur, *God-Hungry*, 14.

11 Arthur, *God-Hungry*, 5, 31.

12 Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African-American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

13 Walt Wangerin, *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005); Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964).

14 Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God's Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2004).

15 For helpful discussion suggestions, see Marlene Lefever, *Creative Teaching Methods* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Ministry Resources, 1996), 202-216.

16 For creative ideas, see Lefever, *Teaching Methods*, 58-201.

17 See Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 91-148.