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## A Narrative of Kingdom Culture

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A Narrative of Kingdom Culture

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to encourage Christian educators to use narrative as a pedagogical strategy to enhance the knowledge of and authenticate the values of the kingdom of God. Effective biblical narrative illustrates and emphasizes heaven's culture, or kingdom culture, in contrast to earthly cultural norms. Narrative effectively suspends disbelief and doubt in the mind of the listener and can facilitate sharing the distinctive Seventh-day Adventist biblical worldview (biblical worldview). Stories help the audience make sense of complex concepts and discover unknown facts and perspectives. The communication of cultural norms through stories has normative ramifications on the listener's cognitive choices and resulting behavior.

Narrative is the primary instrument of teaching Jesus used in His ministry. His stories portray a biblical picture of the kingdom of God. It is incumbent upon the Christian educator to use narrative to normalize cognitive and affective behaviors as taught in scripture. The centerpiece of biblical narrative is salvation, and the centerpiece of a well-told narrative founded on biblical principles should be salvation. To illustrate the power of the narrative to normalize kingdom culture, examples of biblical narrative and business narrative are included in the study.

*Key Words:* Educators, pedagogical strategy, biblical narrative, kingdom culture, earthly cultural norms, biblical worldview, stories, cultural norms, cognitive choices, behavior, Jesus, teaching, Christian education

### A Narrative of Kingdom Culture

The rising sun chases the shadows from the streets as Jesus returns from the peaceful embrace of the Mount of Olives. In the temple the people gather around Him, intent to garner from His lips the seeds of salvation. A scuffle soon distracts Jesus as a group of religious leaders loudly enter the scene with malicious but veiled intent. Then we see her. She clutches the silk sheet hastily wrapped around her and, we only momentarily find pleasure in the sweet fragrance of her perfume, an icon of her trade. She half walks and is half dragged before she falls to the ground where the men thrust her before Jesus. Her dark tresses hide the fear-stricken face and her back curves around her knees as if to protect herself from the first stone. She had been trapped, used as a pawn by one of the very men who now stood accusing her of adultery. "These would-be guardians of justice had themselves led their victim into sin, that they might lay a snare for Jesus" (White, *The Desire of Ages*, 1940, p. 461).

Jesus is not surprised, but these Jewish leaders are. Jesus writes in the dust and their faces change to guilt and shame. The curious crowd moves closer to see the writings in the dust. We hear Jesus say that if we are without sin we can throw the first stone at her. We are part of the crowd that leaves but not before we hear Jesus words to her: "I don't condemn you. You may leave and go get cleaned up. And, if you understand My boundless grace, you can go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

She shivers as a wisp of morning breeze swirls the dust on the courtyard floor. His words quiver in the air. "Her heart was melted, and she cast herself at the feet of Jesus, sobbing out her grateful love, and with bitter tears confessing her sins. This was to her the beginning of a new life, a life of purity and peace, devoted to the service of God" (p. 462).

This is a good story because it strips away the culturally ingrained complexities of salvation. Jesus introduces a new perspective. Evidently, awareness of sin doesn't result in salvation. Only confession does. Jesus suspended her disbelief that she could have salvation, that she could live differently on this earth as well as have life in the earth to come. As educators we want the stories we tell in our classroom to inspire our students to live a saved life. We want these stories to shape the culture of their lives. Educators are preparing students for life, and

stories educators tell can enhance students' ability to view themselves as individuals who can illuminate biblical principles and bring the story of salvation to those within their sphere of influence.

However, a meaningful story is more than a simple string of actions. Aristotle, in his work *Poetics*, said that all good stories must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is its science. A good story must also include complex characters in a plot that involves conflict with a force: human, natural, supernatural or philosophy. This arrangement of words and ideas in the plot is the art of a story; its arrangement is the beauty, power, and influence of a story. Aristotle's basic narrative structure is the guide for a story, but the power to influence is in the artistic creation of meaning that suspends disbelief of new cognitive and behavioral concepts and illuminates a path for normalizing new behaviors.

In his scholarly work, Walter Fisher (1989) argues that people form beliefs and make decisions based on communicated experiences. He states: "When I use the term 'narration,' I do not mean a fictive composition whose propositions may be true or false and have no necessary relationship to the message of that composition. By 'narration,' I mean symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (p. 58). Gargiulo (2005) also argues that a story is no more than the arranging of words to create a specific environment that fulfills a purpose, the purpose being to create meaning (p. 11). This paper argues that narrative that brings meaning to individuals can normalize behavior. Both biblical narrative and business narrative based on biblical principles enhance and authenticate the practice of biblical principles and provide a knowledge of the kingdom of God. Narrative communicates the nuances of kingdom culture and can normalize behaviors reflecting biblical values. In this paper, narrative is defined as Fisher defined it: words and deeds arranged to create meaning for the teller and the listener. Stories and narration as terms are used interchangeably.

Since I here propose that stories have the power to normalize behavior within a culture, I offer a truncated comment on culture. Edgar Schein, known as the founding father of corporate culture, defines culture as "the learned, shared, tacit assumptions on which people base their daily behavior. It results in what is popularly thought of as 'the way we do things around here' ...." (Schein, 1999, p. 24). He continues that while it is tempting to

let that simple definition suffice, corporate culture is too complex to oversimplify; instead we should accept that culture exists in three levels, “from the very visible to the very tacit and invisible” (p. 15). The first and most readily observed level of culture is the artifacts, or all the visible structures and business processes. The second level is the level of values on which the strategies and goals of the company are based. The third level and the most difficult to discern is the underlying assumptions, which are the ultimate source of the first two levels (p. 16).

Stories transcend the world of artifacts and beckon us to evaluate assumptions about the governing forces of our actions, or simply, why we do things the way we do. Narrative can take us to this third level of culture more readily than philosophical or doctrinal debate. When a story penetrates our cultural norms, it has power to suspend our disbelief about how to normalize new cultural assumptions, values and behaviors, either negative or positive. In the opening story of this paper, the woman’s experience with Jesus penetrated her cultural norms and afforded her a vision of normalizing behavior in a different lifestyle apart from the lady-of-the-night culture in which she found herself. At the most complex level of cultural change, she changed her assumptions of God and her value in His universe.

The following two stories illustrate how the actions of leaders can shape corporate culture and change assumptions about an individual’s value to an organization. In both cases, the entry level employees assumed there was merit in following instructions. The stories of the leaders of the organizations are critical in normalizing loyalty or disloyalty. In the book *Building Cross-Cultural Competence*, Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars “recount two starkly different tales of CEOs and how they reacted to being confronted by their own employees for violating company policy” (as cited in Smith P. , 2012, p. 69).

“Charles Revson, head of Revlon Corporation, insisted that everyone sign the time of his or her arrival in a logbook kept at the reception desk. A new receptionist, still in her first week on the job, noticed a man she had not seen before come into the reception area and walk off with the logbook. Chasing after him, she said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but that book is not to be removed. I have strict instructions.’ Revson allegedly turned and stared at her, then said, ‘When you pick up your last paycheck this evening, ask them to tell you who I am.’

“Contrast that with this story of Tom Watson, chairman of IBM, when he approached the gate of one of IBM’s high-security buildings with a group of his senior executives. A 19-year-old security guard refused entry to Mr. Watson because he didn’t have his security badge. One of the executives hissed at her, ‘Don’t you know who that is? He’s the chairman of the company!’ But Watson stopped the whole party and sent someone back for his badge. ‘She’s quite right,’ he said. ‘We make the rules. We keep ‘em.’” (p. 69)

In each case the executive’s response to an entry level employee fulfilling his/her responsibilities contributed to the corporate culture. The two stories have the potential to normalize behavior in employees of each organization. For Revlon employees, the story implies that if you have enough power, the rules don’t apply. For IBM employees, the story engendered respect and unity and validated company policy, thus normalizing employee behavior around the values of the organization.

Not only can stories of executives effectively build corporate culture, but also stories of lower level employees can verify company values and exemplify company culture. Chuck Gallagher was the branch manager for United Rentals, an organization who also was a Husqvarna dealer. Late on a Friday afternoon one of his regular commercial customers called to rent a saw, which the customer needed for the weekend. Unfortunately, Gallagher didn’t have the saw in his rental inventory. When he called the Husqvarna Distribution Center to arrange to pick up the saw for his customer, Gallagher learned that the center was closing early that Friday and would not reopen until Monday morning. This meant that the crew of Gallagher’s customer would be unable to move forward on an important project. Fortunately, Michelle at the distribution center understood the Husqvarna customers-first motto and delivered the saw to the worksite of Gallagher’s customer. Michelle understood that her actions impacted the reputation of her distribution center as well as the Husqvarna company and reflected the company culture (Miller J. G., 2010, pp. 16-17). When retold, her story normalized the company value of customers first as more than just a sign on the wall.

Narrative serves as one element in the Model of Transformative Change offered by Edgar Schein (1999). Organizational change occurs in three stages. First, there is the *unfreezing* in stage one, then the *learning* of new

concepts and new meanings in stage two, and finally *internalizing* new concepts and meanings in stage three (p. 117). Cultural introspection is determined by aspects of the plot highlighted, by the characters included, and by the conflicts and resolutions emphasized. Narrative creates environments that entertain, instruct, stimulate thinking, or navigate problems (Gargiulo, 2005, pp. 7-23). Because stories can offer a parallel experience to ours, offer role models for us, and aid in our discovery and identification of our basic assumptions, they are effective as a pedagogical strategy. "Culture is the sum total of *all the shared, taken-for-granted assumptions that a group has learned throughout its history*" (p. 29). Well-told narrative is a vehicle for recognizing, examining assumptions, and internalizing cultural values.

While it is not the focus of this discussion to categorize stories as negative or positive, the telling of negative stories can impact the culture and normalize behavior if the moral is clearly stated and not left to chance interpretation. One such story has been told and retold about John Mack, Morgan Stanley's president in the 1990s. It was first recounted in the book *Blue Blood and Mutiny* by Patricia Beard. John Mack walked down a hallway one morning and noticed a delivery boy with breakfast. Thirty minutes later, John Mack returned to the same hallway and noticed the same delivery boy waiting in the same spot. John asked the young man if he was waiting with the same order to which the delivery boy replied, "Yes." At this point John asked for the phone number of the Morgan Stanley trader who was the delivery boy's customer. Within seconds of receiving John's call, the trader appeared and was reprimanded for keeping someone waiting who depended on tips for a living. John admonished the trader to never let this happen again (2008 [reprint], p. 89). Unless the moral of the value of respect for others and for their time is specifically drawn out, the story may be viewed as humorous (someone got caught by the president) or may be foster fear of the president in a big-brother-is-watching mode. In negative narrative, the moral cannot be left to capricious cognizance.

"A story is designed to communicate a Truth that is more than the sum of the individual accuracies or inaccuracies within it" (Simmons, 2006, p. 194). Well-structured stories containing elemental truth stimulate the thinking of members in an organization. Stories create awareness of expected behavior within a corporate culture. Stories are designed to place truth in the smallest of Matryoshka dolls, the opening of each one bringing us closer



to the most intricate of all discoveries. Or, sometimes, truth is the jack-in-the box that pops out to gleefully surprise us and totally engage our cognition. The opening story of Mary artfully does both. Jesus slowly suspends the disbelief of the religious leaders about issues of salvation with the writing in the dust. They have an opportunity to respond to His grace. He asks them to evaluate their assumptions about salvation. They do, and they leave the scene. And then—POP—the truth about salvation totally surprises Mary. She didn't ask for it. It was simply offered.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a discourse on elemental truth. It is here simply defined as that guiding principle of heaven-born wisdom. It is the biblical nugget, camouflaged in narrative that says this is how the universe works (Cowan, 2006, p. 10). Young speaks of this elemental truth as being a “God-consciousness” (Young, 1998, p. 5). He continues, “The stage of daily life becomes the scene for viewing the world from God’s perspective.... A consciousness of God and his way of viewing the world enters the commonplace scene to communicate the divine message” (p. 5). Just as business narrative is efficacious for building and protecting corporate culture, so biblical narrative is efficacious for building kingdom-thinking, or the culture of the kingdom of God as we live it on earth. If business, along with other professions, recognizes the value of a well-told story in shaping culture and normalizing behavior, how much more is it incumbent upon the Seventh-day Adventist educator to understand and harness the power of narrative? As Seventh-day Adventist Christians we have a responsibility to influence through stories as Christ did in His ministry.

### **Jesus Used Narrative as His Primary Instrument of Teaching**

Humanity defaults to selfishness and apathy regarding biblical concepts. Christ sought in His life on this earth to skillfully weave truth into the narrative to awaken the desire for and illuminate the path of salvation. Is a statement of doctrines, admittedly valuable, the key to awakening the person to a desire for biblical knowledge? The statement of doctrine engages the cognitive domain while a well-told narrative engages the affective domain. To connect with their audiences, “skilled teachers in Jesus’ day could spin a good tale. They used gross exaggeration and ridiculous comparisons simply to keep their listeners with them. They used humor and puns, drama and harsh comparison in order to make their point” (Burge, 2009, p. 17). One such example is when Jesus

told the Pharisees that they were overlooking the most important spiritual matters while focusing on minutia. “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:24). “No doubt when the crowd heard such statements, they couldn’t help but laugh at the image of Pharisees picking gnats out of their teeth but swallowing entire camels. The gross comparison is both offensive and humorous—and it is clever. In Jesus’ native speech (Aramaic), the word for gnat is *galma* while the word for camel is *gamla*. Jesus had actually said, ‘You strain out a *galma* but all along you swallow *gamla*.’ Reversing two simple letters gave the saying a sharp-edged and memorable poignancy” (pp. 17-18).

From a Jewish cultural perspective Jesus’ stories were non-rational stories bringing hope of salvation to people living in a world of rules and regulations, of fears and forebodings, of meaningless religious rituals. Hendry argues that narrative is inquiry that serves to “explore and examine inevitable doubt and questions human beings’ experience in an unpredictable cosmos that is filled with mystery and awe” (Hendry, 2010, p. 75). “Sacred narratives are modes of critical inquiry that have the potential to provide the faith and compassion that humans need to grapple with the unknown” (Hendry, 2010, p. 79). It is more than pure coincidence that narrative is the primary instrument of teaching Jesus used in His ministry. His narratives allow the Christian world to open questions of life and eternity today just as they allowed the Jews and Gentiles to do. While using simple, common items such as grain, vines, weddings, a neighbor knocking at midnight, and sheep gates, He illuminated deep, stirring truths about the Kingdom of God such as spiritual growth, the intricate connection of faith and works, the vibrant power of prayer, and the essence of salvation’s agape love.

Narrative is how Jesus connected with his audience. “He was a man who spoke their language, who understood labor and taxes and political corruption. Here was a man who picked up the images that surrounded them every day and spun them into examples of timeless truth” (Burge, 2009, p. 16). He understood that “before you can influence you must establish some connection. Story builds connections between you and those you wish to influence. Broader and stronger connections enable broader and stronger communications to flow between you. Story connects via our common humanity—both the good/bad duality of our human condition and our common experiences. Genuine influence occurs between people who feel conformable with each other.

Regardless of our differences—money, status, race, gender, experience, culture—as human beings these common understandings flow beneath our superficial differences. Telling a story that connects to any of these common understandings allows you to connect with any human being” (Simmons, 2006, pp. 116-117). Jesus connected with the sinner through his parables, which “reflected His attitude toward life, and [showed] that His was in the same world in which men live and suffer and are tempted today” (Lockyear, 1963, p. 126).

In the passage from *Desire of Ages*, Ellen White notes the intentionality in Christ’s communication. Notice the metaphors (a type of story) in this passage describing Christ’s delivery of His love message.

“In Christ is the tenderness of the shepherd, the affection of the parent, and the matchless grace of the compassionate Saviour. His blessings He presents in the most alluring terms. He is not content merely to announce these blessings; *He presents them in the most attractive way, to excite a desire to possess them. So His servants are to present the riches of the glory of the unspeakable Gift.* [Italics added] The wonderful love of Christ will melt and subdue hearts, when the mere reiteration of doctrines would accomplish nothing. ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.’ ‘O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah. Behold your God! ... He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom.’” Isaiah 40:1, 9-11. (1940, p. 826)

Not only does Christ present His blessings in the most attractive way possible, but we are admonished as His servants to present His kingdom in a way that will “excite” our students to want His blessings.

“When you offer a story that helps them feel curious again or helps them make sense of their confusion, they will listen. If you can help people better understand what is going on, understand the plot (a plot, any plot) and their role in it, they will follow you. Once they believe in your story they may even start to lead the way. A story can transform the impotent and hopeless into a band of evangelists ready to spread the word. Why do you think religion is full of stories?” (Simmons, 2006, p. 35). The biblical theme of salvation recurs over and over again

in Jesus' parables as well as in the narratives about His life on this earth. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) contain the parables told *by* Jesus while John's gospel focuses on stories *about* Jesus to authenticate Him as the Messiah. Parables told by Jesus and stories about Jesus illustrate the unequivocal value of the sinner, which is core in the culture of the heavenly kingdom.

Jesus used parables to challenge the thinking of his hearers. He wanted them to question the societal values that normed their behavior. He wanted them to embrace kingdom values. If his listeners grasped the biblical worldview, then they could effectively choose behaviors reflecting that worldview. The parables of Jesus provide pictures that make the gospel attractive and enticing because they relate to our human experience. They can make us scream, "Unfair!" Or, "Yes, he got what he deserved." And then we see Jesus standing there holding a different frame on the picture, and we are thrust into another cognitive and affective experience relating to salvation. In this paper I use one illustration of how the parables of Jesus are a form of inquiry that can lead to normalizing kingdom behavior. The parable of the talents offers a philosophical tornado with Jesus exchanging one frame for another in rapid succession.

### **The Ten Talents**

This parable of Jesus is told in Matthew 25:14-30 (New King James Version) as quoted below in a section of Matthew's gospel relating stories of the Second Coming. A very similar narrative is given in Luke 19:11-27, which is not quoted here. Notice that Jesus very succinctly gives the context in the first two verses, and the action and result follow.

<sup>14</sup> "For *the kingdom of heaven* is like a man traveling to a far country, *who* called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. <sup>15</sup> And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. <sup>16</sup> Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. <sup>17</sup> And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also. <sup>18</sup> But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> "So he who had received five talents

came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.'<sup>21</sup> His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'<sup>22</sup> He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.'<sup>23</sup> His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'<sup>24</sup> "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.'<sup>25</sup> And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is yours*.'<sup>26</sup> "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.'<sup>27</sup> So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.'<sup>28</sup> Therefore take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents.'<sup>29</sup> 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.'<sup>30</sup> And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Jesus explicitly states the comparison at the beginning—this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven. No one could miss it. He invites them into an inquiry of the kingdom. There are four characters: the owner/boss, the five-talent servant, the two-talent servant, and the one-talent servant. The three all work for the organization; perhaps they work together on a regular basis. There is no question that the owner refers to Jesus for whom all the believers (servants) work. He doesn't delegate the responsibility of his estate to strangers but to individuals who already are in his organization. In the first few lines of the parable we are immediately met with an inequity that we all face every time we go to work, to church, or anywhere in life—God performs some type of algorithm and

actually does hand out different sums to different people based on *His* assessment of their abilities, which, of course, He has given to them in the first place (vs. 15).

### **Frame one: inequities**

How do you feel if you're the one-talent servant? Who of us hasn't spent some mental energy arguing with God about the talents we possess, spent some emotional energy coloring the flowers of jealousy and envy, or spent time comparing a list of our gifts with the gifts of others? If we accept God as the giver of the talent and we accept His knowledge, there comes in the wake of this acceptance a contentment, a peace, a respect and yes, even joy for the other individual. Did that resonate? The result is joy for *the other person*. "As we consider this human package called Self, and then as we look around at the other packages in the house or in the church, some of them bigger and better, some of them not quite as good [from a human perspective], can we be content and humble because this is how God gave things out (Smith D. B., 2011, p. 151)? So, the first point of this parable is that *all* natural and developed abilities are a gift from God, and we don't all have the same amount.

Inequities exist. Thinking is normalized as kingdom thinking when we accept what we have and have joy about what others have. "The fact we all need to keep in mind every day of our lives is who the money belongs to. It belongs to the Master. It wasn't the servants' money; it was the Boss's. . . . And so it was entirely appropriate for Him to look hard at the résumés of His servants, and then place them in charge of different money market accounts according to His own wisdom about what they could handle" (p. 150).

### **Frame two: obedience**

But, regardless of the inequity of gifts, each servant was asked to do the same thing. Go invest what I've given you. The biblical account doesn't tell us his thought process until the end, but the actions of the one-talent individual indicate he was reluctant to be obedient. Obedience is the second spiritual issue with which this parable asks us to grapple. Two church members (or two employees, depending on your perspective) were obedient and one was not. The owner had entrusted the one-talent man with the equivalent of 20 years of salary for the average worker (Smith D. B., 2011). This is no pittance; it's an enormous amount, and he was offended! He buried his talent and "showed that he despised the gifts of heaven" (White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 1941, p. 355). He didn't just

bury some large sum of money; he buried his opportunity. White continues, “Had he received five talents, he would have buried them as he buried the one” (p. 355). So, it wasn’t capricious on the part of the owner to give him one talent only, and it wasn’t about the amount but about obedience. “The greatest qualification for any man is to obey implicitly the word of the Lord” (p. 359).

#### **Frame three: work ethic**

An additional characteristic of the two servants who were obedient is their work ethic. The Bible says they went to trade, in other words, they went to work and they worked until He returned. Their work involved activities that benefited the estate. By implication, their trading in the marketplace involved interaction with other people to improve the estate, as opposed to the one-talent man who avoided activities. The work they did exemplified their character of faithful service. “The work to which as Christians we are called is to co-operate with Christ for the salvation of souls.... To neglect the work is to prove disloyal to Christ” (p. 358). Despising the gifts of heaven and burying our opportunities in service for Christ on this earth and to develop our characters for heaven is acting the part of the one-talent servant. “However small your talent, God has a place for it. That one talent, wisely used, will accomplish its appointed work. By faithfulness in little duties, we are to work on the plan of addition, and God will work for us on the plan of multiplication. These littles will become the most precious influences in His work” (p. 360).

#### **Frame four: ambition**

Another theme of this parable is ambition. Definitions of ambition include having a strong desire to achieve a goal that requires hard work or having a desire to achieve some rank or position of prominence. There is no indication in the parable that the two servants sought rank or position. Evidently, they had the same goal as the owner—increase the assets of the company. This *might* result in other benefits, but the ambition was to market God’s grace, not to seek a position of prominence. Matthew 6:24 states that we cannot love two masters—we’ll be devoted to one or the other. Apparently, the ambition of an individual will be directed at increasing the wealth of the owner or directed at increasing one’s personal prominence. A person who is focused on his own position is

ambitious in a manner that is contrary to God's way. We need look no further than Genesis 3 and the fall of Lucifer to see that ambition for personal gain is contrary to the government of God.

When the master returns to evaluate his financial portfolio, he commends the two servants for their excellence in managing his assets. Perhaps they received plaques recognizing them as investor of the year. Was that what the two servants were ambitious for? A plaque? No, the parable clearly teaches they were ambitious for the growth of their master's estate. "God expects our lives to reflect gratitude for all he has done for us. He wants us to channel his generosity to those around us.... Stingy people clearly do not fully appreciate what God has done for them" (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2008, p. 240). God's generosity was the commodity traded in the marketplace for which the two servants were commended for increasing.

Perhaps it is easy to compartmentalize our spiritual or kingdom life in one compartment and our business life in another. But managing the assets of the master doesn't mean compartmentalizing the use of the gifts. On the contrary, being ambitious for the kingdom means trading the assets wherever possible, whenever possible and with whomever possible. Ron F. Wagley, retired Chairman, CEO, and President of Transamerica Occidental Life Insurance Company relays his perspective in the following personal story. "The Bible tells me to do my work as unto the Lord, not man (Eph.6:7). This did away with office politics and shifted my career perspective on getting ahead. No longer could I be upset, complain, and be critical for not getting a raise or promotion when God was my real boss! I began to shift my focus to the quality of my work, because I wanted to do my very best not just to please men but now to please God and leave the results to him" (pp. 45-46). Wagley's comment reflects a statement in *The Great Controversy*. "Those who do love God with all the heart will desire to give Him the best service of their life, and they will be constantly seeking to bring every power of their being into harmony with the laws that will promote their ability to do His will" (White, 1940, p. 473).

#### **Frame five: rewards**

Yet another theme that this parable offers for exploration is the theme of rewards. Is faithfulness its own intrinsic reward? The parable denotes a tone of excited fulfillment, of satisfaction in a job well done as the servants greet their Lord, "Look, Lord, look what has happened to *Your* assets. In this case each of the first two



servants receives the same two-part reward. The owner says, “I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21). It is not inconsistent with corporate practice that an individual who performs well in the company will be promoted—will be given a management roll over a larger group, a larger territory, or service more accounts. How amazed the five-talent man must have been when the owner said to him that he would be ruler over *many* things. Incredible promotion! He just went from being the employee who got stuck with all the weekend call duties to being regional broker for the national investment firm. In addition to the promotion, the owner bestows a second reward which is more significant: entering into the joy of your lord. Now the faithful servants have not only received the office with a window, but they have just been given a guest house inside the owner’s gated estate. Plus, they now have direct access to the owner. Evidently, the owner is exuberant about their success.

**Frame six: increase**

And what is the joy of the Lord? The Psalmist says, “Let them shout for joy and be glad, Who favor my righteous cause; And let them say continually, ‘Let the Lord be magnified, Who has pleasure in the prosperity of His servant’” (Psalm 35:27, NKJV). It is appropriate, since this parable has an over-arching theme of salvation, to pick up Isaiah’s refrain, “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness....” (Isaiah 35:10). In his commentary on Matthew, France states: “Is it reading too much into the parable to envisage heaven as a state not of indolent pleasure but of active cooperation with the purpose of God as well as enjoyment of his favor?” (2007, p. 955). It seems in God’s providence that talents improved equal more talents and more responsibility. But, responsibility for what? I believe the answer is that it is both our joy and our responsibility to know Christ more. “He offers us the privilege of cooperation with Christ in revealing His grace to the world, that we may receive increased knowledge of heavenly things. Looking unto Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God.... We enlarge our capacity for knowing God ... and we have continually increasing power to receive the riches of the knowledge and wisdom of eternity” (White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, 1941, p. 355).

White comments further on the joy-of-the-Lord theme. "They will enter into the joy of the Lord as they see in His kingdom those who have been redeemed through their instrumentality. And they are privileged to participate in His work there, because they have gained a fitness for it by participation in His work here.... And our reward for working with Christ in this world is the greater power and wider privilege of working with Him in the world to come" (p. 361). So, in the end, the faithful servants entered into the joy of their owner because they knew his business better, had increased in their understanding of it, and were prepared to appreciate it to a greater extent than before they traded in the marketplace of a lost world.

A subtle nuance of this parable illustrates this as an additional dimension of the joy of the Lord. The servants return to the owner his own, but in verse 26, the servant who just brought his investment to the owner seems to be in possession of the 10 talents plus the 1 from the unfaithful servant. "This slave's success attracts further reward, on top of what has already been declared in v. 21 ... and underlines the theme that success breeds further success, while failure is further compounded" (France, 2007, p. 956).

**Frame seven: judgment.**

Pronouncing success and failure necessitates judgment. In a court of law when a judgment is handed down it is the result of applying a standard. What did the land owner want? What was his standard? The one-talent servant failed because he did nothing. He didn't lose his talent. In fact, he was careful *not* to lose it. He took no risks. His interpretation of the culture was that his master would rather have him do nothing than take a risk. He did not anticipate the results of his behavior in the kingdom culture. For this, he was cast into outer darkness.

Schein states, "The argument for taking culture seriously, therefore, is that one should anticipate consequences and make a choice about their desirability" (Schein, 1999, p. 3). The confused servant who fails to understand the culture of God's kingdom falls into the description given by Ellen White. "Many are deceived as to their true condition before God. They congratulate themselves upon the wrong acts which they do not commit, and forget to enumerate the good and noble deeds which God requires of them, but which they have neglected to perform. It is not enough that they are trees in the garden of God. They are to answer his expectation by bearing fruit. He holds them accountable for their failure to accomplish all the good which they could have done, through

his grace strengthening them” (*The Great Controversy*, 1940, p. 601). Judgment is clearly another theme of this story.

In 2009 I offered to assist in a relatively new ministry in our church for the women in Chattanooga Room in the Inn. This was a risk for me. I had never been involved in a ministry outside of Sabbath School, which is comparatively a pretty safe place to minister. Weekly, as I enter this unmarked building (for the safety of the women) to sit in a Bible study where women voluntarily come, I recognize the difference between their street knowledge and my lack thereof. I recognize the difference between my knowledge of salvation and their lack thereof. As the borders of our lives touch, I realize my obligation to share the love of Jesus with these homeless, often battered women. I have a social advantage which, interestingly enough, is referred to as a talent in *Christ’s Object Lessons*. “Social advantages are talents, and are to be used for the benefit of all within reach of our influence” (White, 1941, p. 353). Social advantage is a talent most college students have. Simply their ability to attend college provides a social advantage and an opportunity to cultivate kingdom behaviors.

#### **Frame eight: knowing the Boss**

Knowing and trusting the Master is the ultimate theme in this power-packed parable. Understanding the business, knowing the owner. “That’s God, of course. Two of these servants seemed to know the Boss quite well. They enjoyed working for Him. When He gave them a challenge, they got right to work. They invested with zest and enthusiasm. Interestingly, there seems to have been no resentment between them over the fact that one got five talents and the other only two...they didn’t mind because they knew and trusted the Master. It was His call; that was fine with them” (Smith D. B., 2011, p. 162).

This theme of knowing the Boss is couched in the climax of the story where the one-talent servant falsely accuses the Boss of unfair trade practices. He didn’t know the culture of the kingdom. He lost his talent because he didn’t know the owner of the talent. *Christ’s Object Lessons* expands our knowledge of the situation. “‘Take the talent from him.’ The continual misuse of ... talents will effectually quench ... the Holy Spirit, which is the only light. The sentence, ‘Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness,’ sets Heaven’s seal to the choice which they themselves have made for eternity” (White, Christ's object lessons, 1941, p. 365).

The parables of Jesus most often disrupt our thinking. At first they seem like cultural accidents. However, they take us beyond the artifacts of the kingdom of heaven. In the above parable, our assumptions surface about responsibility, fairness, and a God who delivers His companionship as a reward, and yet, delivers separation or judgment to one whose choices demonstrated his value of the relationship with his Lord. The story contains the elemental truth about salvation. Salvation is kingdom behavior that excitedly exclaims, “Look, Lord . . .!”

### **The Appeal of a Story**

But why do stories work? Why do they have the power to normalize behavior? Paul Smith (2012), in his book *Lead with a Story*, offers some compelling reasons that narrative is an effective tool. They are obvious and may be intuitive to us as educators. We know stories spread easily, and it is this very fact that makes it incumbent upon educators to use stories to inspire students. Smith documents that stories appeal to all types of learners and puts the listener in a posture of learning (pp. 11-12). Jesus created a posture of learning in His listeners.

It is interesting to note that Lockyear (1963), in his work *All the Parables of the Bible*, offers similar merits of using parables. He states that Jesus knew that what humans discover for themselves they more readily believe and accept. People are attracted to parables. “The parabolic method arouses thought.... Parables stir up, or excite the affections, and awaken consciences.... Parables arrest and hold attention” (p. 17). The truth buried in a narrative, once discovered, has enduring effects (pp. 17-18).

These enduring effects in narrative result from the use of sensory details that trigger a response. “That’s why you salivate when you watch close-ups of someone peeling an orange, want to move (or at least tap your feet) when you see dancing to a compelling beat, and feel thirsty when you watch someone drink a Coke. Close your eyes a minute and think about the commercials where a Coke is poured into a glass. The bottle is dripping with sweat and little bubbles burst to the surface as your pour. You not only see the image in your mind’s eye, but maybe you also smell the coke, feel the bubbles on your face or feel the condensation on the icy cold glass” (Buckner & Rutledge, 2011).

The following story illustrates more dramatically the emotional responses created through sensory details in a story. One Sunday afternoon, a father who was a pilot and his 12-year-old daughter Stacey went for a joy-ride

in the family's single-engine Cessna. Little white caps danced with the sunshine on the deep blue waters of Lake Michigan. The shoreline was a ribbon of brown and green hues when suddenly the engine quit. Silence! Stacey's bleach-white face and her rigid form spoke her terror. Stacey's father remained calm, explaining to his terrified daughter that he needed to fly the plane "differently" to gain speed to restart the engine. He would fly the plane downward toward the cold waters of Lake Michigan. Stacey's mouth moved in response but fear captured her tongue in silence. Her father put the plane into a dive. Nothing! Stacey sees only the water and fear paralyzes her as her sweaty palms grip her seat. Again, her father puts the plane into adjusting switches in the cockpit as before. Silence! Then a sputter, and finally a normal hum brought sighs in the cockpit. Twenty minutes later when they landed safely, this courageous dad turned to Stacey and said, "Now, honey, whatever you do, *don't tell Mom!*" (Miller J. G., 2012, pp. 28-30).

If we allow ourselves to feel this story, we have an adrenalin rush that mimics Stacey's as we imagine the plane diving *towards* the blue water, waiting to engulf her. We may feel fear, urgency, or suspense as we imagine the plane diving in silence towards Lake Michigan. But what all readers certainly feel is the sense of comic relief when Stacey's father strictly admonishes her not to tell her mother. We felt fear, then relief just as Stacey and her father did. "Our brains experience a story as if we were experiencing it ourselves" (Buckner & Rutledge, 2011). The reader can relate to the story because most people have experienced similar dynamics either at work or at home. An emergency demands flying the plane differently. We can appreciate the experience of Stacey and her father because it is one of human existence that involves our intellect and our emotions.

#### **Narrative as a Professional Tool**

Stories are "sticky" because they effectively blend the cognitive and affective dimensions of experience. A study completed by the London Business School found that "the sole use of statistics in a presentation can lead to a retention rate of around 5–10 percent at best. If you couple that statistic with a bit of storytelling, you can increase the retention rate to around 25-30 percent. But the biggest impact comes from using storytelling as a standalone communication medium. This can drive the retention rate of your audience up to as much as 65-70 percent" (Love, 2008). In addition to retention, accuracy is also increased. "Research also shows that people

remember the messages in stories far longer and with greater accuracy than any other form of communication” (Buckner & Rutledge, 2011).

Stories are “sticky.” Undoubtedly, we have all had the experience of retelling a story that stuck with us when we cannot remember the name of the individual who told us the story or perhaps where we even heard or read the story. But, we remember the story. Narrative is not confined to the discipline of rhetoric alone. “In line with cognitive and educational psychologists are media psychologists, such as Rutledge (2011) and neuroscientist, such as Zull (2002) and Medina (2008), who are fascinated by the fact that the human brain is wired to enjoy and remember stories” (Kalogeras, 2013, p. 121).

Professionals in multiple disciplines recognize the value of narrative in their respective professions. Harvard Medical School and other graduate programs include a relatively new field known as narrative medicine. Even in the fields of law, economics, business, and of course, history, drama, literature, weblogs, sociology and anthropology recognize the benefits of narrative. (Forman, 2013) Stories offer a wide range of benefits “from making sense of experience to reaching audiences emotionally to wielding explanatory and persuasive powers” (p. 11).

Admittedly, the subtle message in business is that stories belong to the humanities and that business is about sound decision-making based on numbers and models. However, in the 1990s storytelling began to move into modern business. In addition to academic studies, trade books explored business narrative. David Armstrong (1992) was one of the earliest with his book *Managing by Storying Around*. In the last decade many successful organizations have been intentional about the use of stories as a leadership tool. Among them are “Microsoft, Nike, Motorola, Saatchi & Saatchi, Berkshire Hathaway, Eastman Kodak, Proctor & Gamble, Mark Kay Cosmetics, Kimberly-Clark, 3M, The Container Store, REI, Northwestern Mutual, and the World Bank” (Smith P. , 2012, p. 3). In 1998 at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, the organization “hosted the first in a series of forums on organizational storytelling. Attracting representatives from organizations like the World Bank, Walt Disney, Capital One, and Harvard, ... this pioneering work ignited the explosion of public interest in storytelling in business” (National Storytelling Festival, n.d.).

Stephen Denning, a private consultant specializing in knowledge management and organizational storytelling, poses the question that may be in every business leader's mind: "What's the ROI of storytelling?" (Denning, 2005, p. 20) In his discussion he posits that the cost is negligible with returns that compound over time. What do business managers and business leaders do? They talk. Henry Mintzberg, in his classic *Nature of Managerial Work*, shows that talking comprises more than 75 percent of daily activities (Mintzberg, 1973). It naturally follows that if a business leader is talking, he or she should communicate in the most efficient and effective manner. "Communicating through stories usually means talking more succinctly, so that the cost in terms of executive and staff time is actually lower than for ineffective talk" (Denning, 2005, p. 20). Narrative that is true, is well-constructed, and fits the audience will influence culture and normalize behavior.

As an example, Lori Silverman (2009), in her book *Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over*, tells the following story. A high-powered team had prepared a 50-page strategy document which they had not been able to get the president of Bristol-Myers Squibb to read. The team was desperate. In quiet, creative, risk-taking action, they crafted a *future* news story depicting the market results of the implementation of their strategy. They formatted the story as a news story on the front cover of his favorite newspaper with a headline depicting the success of the company. He didn't recognize the future date of the "newspaper" until he was nearly half way through the article. At that point he recognized the value of the strategy his team wanted him to implement (p. 149). The strategy hadn't changed, the 50-page document hadn't changed, but the story had changed his opinion of the strategy.

Storytelling works because it puts the audience in a learning mode. Stories lead us to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief." Advertisers and people in sales learned long ago that a good story, well-told is the shortest path between them and their customer. "If you happen upon the right story, two people with no prior knowledge of one another can quickly find a flood of common experiences" (Gargiulo, 2005, p. 12). Stories help us make sense of complex concepts. Stories put facts we know into a context we understand just as is illustrated in the story in the previous paragraph. Stories uncover facts we didn't know. Stories engage and surprise us. Having willingly suspended disbelief, we are open to new truth, new concepts, new perspectives.

Stories in business can open the biblical worldview to colleagues. Bateson argues that “Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning” (1990, p. 34). A story is a powerful tool of persuasion.

Influencers and leaders are persuaders whose primary focus is not to manipulate, but to stimulate analytical thinking, allowing the audience to see the abstract through a lens of possibility. This is exactly what happened in the case of the president of Bristol-Myers Squibb. The newsprint story suspended his disbelief. This is what a story accomplishes; however, a story does not replace analytical thinking. “A business model incorporates both a storytelling dimension (does it provide a compelling narrative?) and a calculative dimension (do the numbers add up and sound plausible?).... Calculation and story-telling go hand in hand” (Araujo & Easton, 2012, p. 316). While analytics can win the mind, a story can win the mind and the heart and thus is well-suited for individuals who wish to be leaders and influencers. “Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. And that’s where you must go if you are to motivate people not only to take action but to do so with energy and enthusiasm” (Denning, 2005, p. 5).

### **Conclusion**

“For every organization the *why* is what it’s all about. If a receptionist can’t tell a caller or visitor what the organization does and why it does it, that’s a problem. If the supermarket cashier pushes products out of fear [she may be written up for failing to ask the customer if he or she is interested in a certain product] rather than a desire to serve, that’s a problem. We need to infuse our mission into everything we do—and doing so is not a one-time job” (Miller J. G., 2010, pp. 12-13). Repeating the mission over and over and over is paramount to everyone knowing the why. Our mission as Seventh-day Adventist educators is to continually provide our students with pictures of the kingdom of heaven. Repeat the pictures of salvation again and again. Narrative is a pedagogical tool that can break barriers, or unfreeze as Schein says, lead our students to challenge their own cultural expectations and assumptions, and view kingdom behavior as a possibility.

This is a battle. Although throughout the paper I have written very positively about the power of the story to normalize behavior, it also has the power to polarize and distance, which is another topic for research. “It is Satan’s constant effort to misrepresent the character of God, the nature of sin, and the real issues at stake in the



great controversy. His sophistry lessens the obligation of the divine law and gives men license to sin. At the same time, he causes them to cherish false conceptions of God, so that they regard him with fear and hate, rather than with love" (White, *The Great Controversy*, 1940, p. 568). Jesus used narrative to present the opportunity for his listeners to wrestle with their own assumptions about the kingdom of heaven, to correct the falsehoods of the arch deceiver, to explore the unknown. May we as educators go and do likewise.

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