

Biblical Storytelling and The Experience of Liminality

By Tim Coombs

When the Word written becomes the Word experienced by the collective whole in the present moment, the participants can become abducted by the power of the story. When a story resonates in the heart of the audience they exist, if for a brief time, betwixt and between two worlds, between the world of the Biblical story and their own. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner referred to such an experience as liminality.¹ It is in the liminal state that we are freed, if only temporarily, from the structures that restrict us, and therefore are open to see the possibility of change.

According to Turner, the state of liminality can be induced by the use of a dominant symbol used in a ritual process.² Dominant symbols can be anything that is endowed with powerful meaning and significance by a community, usually having a multi-vocal quality or a range of meanings attached to them. For instance, the bread and cup in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper serve as dominant symbols for the church, in that not only are they used in the primary ritual, but they also symbolize for the Church a range of meanings such as thanksgiving (eucharist), reconciliation, communion, sacrifice, etc. The bread and cup may focus on one of these meanings or embody them all at once.

Though it usually does not have a visual component like the sacraments, a cherished story also can serve as a dominant symbol with the power to invoke a state of liminality when used in the context of ritual. Depending on its context, a congregational or biblical story can have different meanings that exhibit its multivocality.³ For instance, at Trinity Presbyterian Church where I am pastor, there is a story about a ladies Bible study that met in the unfinished kitchen of the new building. The reason the kitchen was unfinished was that there was not enough money left after the main construction of the facility in 1960. During the Bible study one of women took out a twenty-dollar bill and put it on the card table in the middle of the group and said, "I was saving this to buy my husband a new coat for Christmas. He can wear his old coat a little longer." Her twenty dollars started a new round of sacrificial giving that enabled the kitchen to be finished. This story has been told at Trinity to highlight themes of sacrificial giving, courage, possibility thinking, if not just for its basic inspirational message. Sometimes the telling

¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 132.

² Victor Turner, *The Forest People* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 27-31.

³ When I first studied the work of Victor Turner in seminary, I wondered why he chose the term "multi-vocal" as opposed to the more common term "multi-dimensional" to describe the power of dominant symbols. Only recently have I come to understand that the symbols seem to speak their many meanings. This vocalizing quality of dominant symbols led credence to the idea that a cherished story can serve the same purpose.

of this story seeks to emphasize one of these themes, other times it has been told with an open-ended purpose.

The same experience can occur around a biblical story that has come to be embraced or poignant to a given congregation or group. My congregation has chosen Micah 6:8 as its mission statement, and have been trying to live into the call to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” One only needs to ask the question, “What does the Lord require?” to invoke a sense of challenge and inspiration on their behalf. Over these last two years, the story of Peter and Cornelius, Acts 10-11:18, has been a chief story invoked as the congregation has begun to transform itself in regards to the challenge of Micah 6:8 as well as it seeks to develop its own digital culture ministry. No doubt other congregations have biblical stories that have become important in their life together and taken on symbolic value.

Turner described that when a group becomes liminal together, such as when an audience or congregation is captivated by a sacred story event, they enter a state he called *communitas*.⁴ *Communitas* is a collective state of liminality, in which all participants exist in a state of equality and oneness since the normal roles and status of their structured world do not apply. Walter Ong has noted that not only is a story re-membered in an audience’s hearing and experience, but when a speaker is addressing an audience; the audience becomes unified group with the teller.⁵ This unified experience in the story being told is more accurately described as *communitas* as opposed to community. The experience of *communitas* differs from community as the latter entails structured rules and roles that endure with time.⁶ *Communitas* is a relatively momentary existence experienced by a group exemplified by a sense of homogeneity or oneness that comes from a feeling that “we are all in this together.” In a state of *communitas* a group such as a congregation become a “threshold people,” enabling them to be realigned with its sacred story, and thereby re-enter its structured world as a people transformed.

Stories, either read in silence or heard out loud have always had the power to bring about a liminal state. However, only the experience of storytelling can evoke the experience of *communitas*. If I am reading a story that captivates me, that is, lifts me out of my present world and into the world of the story, I have that experience as an individual. Reading in silence is a private activity. However, a storytelling event has the potential to bring an entire audience together into a liminal state, where all may enter into the world of the story. Thinking anthropologically, the storyteller serves as the priest or shaman leading the congregation or tribe into a state of being neither here nor there, betwixt and between their own and the world of the story.

⁴ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word*, (New York City: NY, Routledge, 1982), 70-73.

⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 106-107.