

2004 NOBS Scholars Conference:  
Initial communication between the participants

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**My experience in biblical storytelling:**

I have been a practicing professional storyteller since 1988, earning my living and supporting my family by means of freelance performances, workshops, classes, etc. across the U.S. (until 2000 when I remarried and my husband's income enabled me to cut back to part-time storytelling and to enter theological school). The majority of my storytelling repertoire and experience has consisted of my original retellings of traditional/folk tales, but over the years I have also worked with personal stories, historical tales, original stories, and biblical stories.

In 1997 I participated in the ELCA National Lutheran Youth Gathering in New Orleans as one of the sixty-five Hotel Team storytellers with the 35,000 Youth Gathering participants, and was introduced to Tom Boomershine, Dennis Dewey, and biblical storytelling "*a la* NOBS." Through that experience, I embraced the importance of learning our/my sacred stories from scripture by heart, and experienced the power of telling these stories and teaching them each day at morning devotions in "my" hotel ballroom, which held approximately 1,500 youth—whew!

I began to include more and more biblical storytelling in my repertoire as a storyteller, as well as in my work in my local congregation, and in 1999 attended the NOBS Festival Gathering for the first time. Bolstered by the support, resources and networking found in NOBS, biblical storytelling has grown to be a vibrant part of my professional storytelling work and ministry. I have led numerous workshops on biblical storytelling at churches and church-related events throughout Colorado and beyond, for religious educators, clergy, and laypeople. I am often engaged by church groups to tell biblical stories for various kinds of occasions. I have been an advocate for and practitioner of biblical storytelling at the theological school where I have studied over the past four years—including often telling the day's scripture "lesson" in chapel or at special events, encouraging and coaching others to do so, teaching a one-credit class on Storytelling in Ministry, and organizing a "mini-Epic Telling" with students, staff and faculty.

It is *always* received, at least by some if not by all, as a deeply meaningful way of encountering scripture.

**Issues I would like to see addressed by scholars:**

One of my greatest concerns, spiritually and pastorally as well as intellectually, is that too many "regular folk" in the pews and in society are, in my opinion, too hung up on the concept of "literality" in scripture; this may be tied to an understanding of just what "scripture" means as well ("Holy Scripture," "the Word of God," etc.).

If people could embrace, or even just open up to, the notion (the fact? reality?) that much of what has been written down, collected and canonized as scripture is really story—sacred story, to be sure—and not literal history, and if they could understand how

living and creative the processes of story and storytelling are and always have been...perhaps that could enable them to stop clinging to awkward, conflicting, nonsensical and harmful literal interpretations and proof-texting (but, as my husband would say, how do I *really* feel about this?...).

Okay, so I tell the stories, and attempt to educate people about the nature and process of story...What do I think could helpfully come from scholarship, here? (And then made available to pastors and religious educators, to help them educate and lead the flocks. And also made available to me and my ilk, to help us communicate with the religious educators, pastors, and laypeople that we work with.) Perhaps many relevant books and articles have already been written, and I/we must continue to search them out, digest them, and integrate the material into our work—but I would love to find or create and then offer to “regular folks” more and more soundly-researched and faithfully-expressed arguments/discussions about the reality and *acceptability-to-people-of-faith* of non-literal understandings of scripture.

[By “faithfully-expressed,” I mean with a viewpoint of faith and of speaking to people of faith; it is entirely too easy for many to dismiss a writer as a “godless scholar” if that writer seems to only care about scholarship and not about people’s life of faith.]

How can biblical scholars and storytellers work together to help Joe and Jane Pewsitter embrace the Bible as largely telling the stories of God’s people and God’s love for creation, for us all—without having to mindlessly (my bias is showing) cling to supposedly literal (and many contradictory) “truths” from “the Word of God”—? This can become so divisive, and shallow, and seems to deny God’s gifts of intelligence, discernment and imagination.

Here is where, in addition to biblical scholars, theologians can help as well, with discussing the understanding of the phrase/concept: “the Word of God.” As one who embraces Martin Luther’s understanding of the Word, I can nearly weep with frustration when faced with the mindset that “trusting in the Word of God,” for example, means clinging to literal interpretation (if and when such is even clear).

### **Reflection on what I have learned as a result of practicing this spiritual discipline/craft and art:**

In the years that I have been learning and telling biblical stories, I have learned deeply of the power and value of doing so—in spiritual, devotional, and worship-practice endeavors...and also exegetically.

I have in part been led to appreciate the exegetical value of learning and telling biblical material by two of the professors with which I had the privilege of working in my recent M.Div. study. Dr. David Petersen, a Hebrew Bible scholar at Candler School of Theology and formerly a professor of mine at Iliff School of Theology, often urges his students to pay attention to the *story* with its characters, patterns and structures, as an invaluable part of exegeting many biblical texts. Gene Tucker (Hebrew Bible scholar retired from Candler and recently adjunct professor at Iliff), in a class on 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, advocated and practiced reading texts *aloud*, asserting that hearing the texts can often lead to insights and connections that silent reading alone cannot.

Such encouragement from within the academy, combined with my own experience with and thoughts on (and my worldview of?) storytelling, has led me to

experiment with crafting something I have dubbed a “storytelling hermeneutic,” which seemed like an effective approach to a class assignment to explore the role of women in the Gospel of Luke. [I am including a slightly-revised version of that paper, “Sharing Out of Our Resources: A Storyteller’s Look at the Role of Women in the Gospel of Luke,” along with this response to Dennis’ suggested “talking/writing points” for our introductory communication in preparation for the first NOBS Scholars Conference. If anyone of you may have the time and inclination to read it, I would be most interested in any critical feedback you may have to offer.] As I attempt to argue in the paper, understanding aspects of the process of storytelling and looking through that lens can legitimately provide a unique and useful way to work out questions that can be asked of the text.

Such an approach may prove useful in dealing with my concern noted above about literal biblical interpretation, at least in those instances when literalism leads to distress over conflicting biblical material.

I am moved to close my comments with a bit of a *credo*:

There are some who think that storytelling is so natural to human beings that it suggests a definition: we are the creatures who think in stories. There is a deep quality of joy, of grace, and of fellowship in the telling of stories. Christianity, and the faith tradition of the Hebrews out of which it grew, is grounded in story. More than half of the Bible is story, and Jesus of course was a storyteller.

I believe that God is incarnational: incarnated in Jesus as the Word become flesh, and, in some way, in all of creation. It is fitting to share this Word of God, and to partake in and to celebrate creativity, by means of storytelling—for the teller incarnates the story, whatever story is being told, and engages in acts of creation. God’s spirit, the breath of life, the body of the teller and the body of the community gathered around story—all are present and active in the communal, creative act of storytelling.

Megan McKenna writes that “the soul has its own reality and stories take us there, into the deepest places.”<sup>1</sup> This is profoundly true, whether the story is biblical or personal, traditional or literary-fictional.

Biblical stories must be told. Aloud. Without a book. In today’s culture of electronic communications, with the domination of imagery and sound (called by some, “post-literate”), “just reading” the Bible isn’t enough. The lively telling of biblical stories, embodying them and sharing them in community, opens us to God’s *ruach* and can take us deep into our souls.

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<sup>1</sup> McKenna, Megan and Tony Cowan, *Keepers of the Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 63.