GOD'S STORY IS MY STORY:
THE APPLICATION OF A NARRATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY TO PREACHING

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10th June 2011

Dedicated

With thanks,

To my father, who asked me to preach at his funeral,
and my mother, who affirmed that request;

To Leigh, who held my hand,
Freya, who shared my tears,
and Skye, who sang the words when I was unable to.

Contents

Abstract

This dissertation applies the orienting principles and key processes of narrative practice to the preaching of sermons and the teaching of preaching. Narrative practice is a practical application of a narrative epistemology. A narrative epistemology suggests that we make meaning in our lives by constructing a multi-storied narrative that relates our experiences in a somewhat linear fashion. The personal narrative is negotiated with our community and society, and has real impacts on our identity and life. Through therapeutic conversations the narrative practitioner assists people to recognise the hopeful, preferred and previously unrecognized storylines which open up the possibility of a changed relationship to the issue about which they are seeking assistance. The therapeutic process can be conceptualised as the collaborative reauthoring of the personal narrative.

From the parallels found in narrative practice, this dissertation proposes that the transformational capacity of the sermon may be its contribution to the reauthoring of the personal narrative to embrace its intersection with God's story.

The specific processes of narrative practice which are explored for their application to preaching include that of scaffolding for meaning, the use of metaphor and image, and "deconstructive" techniques. The position of the preacher is considered, as are the role of the congregation and the liturgical context of sermons. Suggestions are made regarding an approach to teaching preaching from a social-constructivist perspective.

The dissertation concludes that a narrative epistemology provides a vehicle for linking together much that is known about effective preaching, and may therefore be a useful concept to reflect upon when approaching the preaching task, and a useful framework for the teaching of preaching.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature …… Date ……..

Acknowledgements

It is with sincere gratitude that I wish to thank Andrew Dutney and Peter Lockwood. I imposed on friendship in asking you to supervise this work, and in return you gave me space to explore, affirmation and support.

Michael White's creativity inspired so many of us, but far more than that, he gave the gift of friendship generously.

I grew up listening to my father's sermons, and through him came to know a gracious God. Many other gifted pastors and colleagues have been a blessing to me, and people from whom I have learned much. I think particularly of John Sabel, Rick Mickelson, Rick Strelan, Peter Close, Bob Kempe, Tim Muller and James Winderlich. The encouragement of the students and faculty of Wartburg Theological Seminary, including my preaching professor Jim Nieman, and Barbara Lundblad and the women of the Auburn College Preaching Academy 2003, has contributed much to the shaping of my pastoral identity. Members of the North American Academy of Homiletics and Societas Homiletica have been generous in their sharing. Thank you, to all of you.

There are so many companions who have shared segments of my journey. Among them I'd like to name

Tony—thanks for collegiality and time to talk.

Allie, Margaret, Helen, Helene, Hanna—without the community of women theologians of the LCA, who, like me, do not know their place, the road would be very lonely.

A particular thanks to my loving, extended family, who trod the fine line between interest in my work and harassing me to finish, despite all the shared things that were put on hold while I needed "just two more weeks."

Thank you, Leigh, for your love, for the confidence you have in my Call, and for taking up the baton when I had no more energy.

I am continually amazed at the strength and sensitivity of our daughters, Freya and Skye: you make the world a better place. Thank you for the myriad ways you give me support.

And thanks to our gracious and loving God, who through the gift of our grandchildren re-awakened in me a sense of awe.

INTRODUCTION

A NARRATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY AND PREACHING

My writing is exploratory because I have no idea what I believe until I force myself to say it. For me, writing turns out to be my way of believing.[1]

Stanley Hauerwas

Some assumptions

This exploration is about preaching. About sermons. So the first of my assumptions is self-evident. I believe that preaching matters—that it is worth exploring. I think that preaching is still relevant. I think this because I have seen that listening to a sermon can make a positive difference in the life of others. I have experienced it for myself.

The previous two sentences disclose another assumption of mine. I believe the task of preaching is about making a positive difference. It is the proclamation of Good News. Paul declares that his life's work is "the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace."[2] The "good news" that we have justification by grace, through faith, is news that is "the whole purpose of God."[3] As the church's testimony regarding God's gracious activity in the world, the Bible provides the basis for most sermons preached. The strength of that foundation, however, is dependent on individual texts being examined to see how they point to God, and God's grace. Paul Scott Wilson declares,

> If preachers do not look for God in texts, they may not find God. If they do not find God, how can they know they have found God's word? Without a focus on God one can have no grace. Without a focus on grace one can have no gospel. Without a focus on gospel one cannot live up to the commission Christ gave to preach it.[4]

Further, I assume that a focus on God is not a focus on an abstract notion, but on relationship. Belief in a triune God is belief in a creator God that reaches

1 Stanley Hauerwas, "The Formation of a Theologian: Learning from Others," *Christian Century* 127, no. 10 (2010): 34.

2 Acts 20:24a NRSV

3 Acts 20:27b

4 Paul Scott Wilson, "Preach the Text, or Preach the Gospel?" (paper presented at The Academy of Homiletics *Annual Meeting*, West Palm Beach, Florida, 2006).

out to God's creatures in the face of Christ and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God's self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit argues against a remote or indifferent God, and for a Christian life that is lived through communion with one another.

My fourth assumption is that when the gospel is preached, something happens. The sermon is performative, and has a real impact on the lives of the hearers (and the preacher): God declares "My word … shall not return empty, but … it shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."[5] In line with this assumption, the defining statement of the homiletic movement dominant in North America since the fourth quarter of the previous century is, "The question is no longer "what did the sermon say?" but "what did the sermon do?"[6]

In the text from Acts referred to above, Paul continues, "now I commend you to God and to the message of [God's] grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified."[7] The aim of the sermon is to "build up." The "doing" of the sermon is about renewal, liberation and transformation. Elaine Graham expresses it this way: "Preaching as feminist *praxis* portrays the act of proclamation and reception as efficacious and theologically authentic … in terms of the sermon's disclosive and liberating impact upon the life of the community and its related contexts. … [it is] oriented to transformative living and renewed practice."[8]

An effective sermon, therefore, is one that assists in the liberation and transformation of the individuals and communities that listen to the sermon.

What produces effective preaching?

There are two main traditional aetiologies of the efficacy of the sermon. The first attributes agency outside of the preacher, claiming that the Holy Spirit works through the proclaimed Word to enliven faith in the believer. The second utilises communication theory and draws on the research that also informs advertising, training and other secular pursuits.

5 Is 55:11 NRSV

6 Fred B Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3 ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 57.

7 Acts 20:32

8 Elaine L Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 182.

Scripture attributes the performative aspects of the sermon to the Holy Spirit. Just as all human qualities are the gift of the creator God, speech emanates from the one who asks, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"[9] The Hebrew Bible testifies to a God who inspires speech for both supplication and proclamation. While Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel are specifically set aside as people who will speak for God,[10] the people of Israel are promised the day when the gift of the spirit of prophecy is widely given.[11] That speech—and the result of speech—is God's gift, is further reinforced by the promise in Zephaniah, that one day all people will have their speech purified so that they can appeal to and serve God.[12]

In the early Christian church, Peter's sermon at Pentecost claims the gift of understanding as the fulfilment of the Joel prophecy,[13] and each act of proclamation is seen as a response to Christ's command and the Spirit's stirring.[14] The impact on the listener lies entirely with the Holy Spirit;[15] Paul tells the church in Corinth that "no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God."[16]

However, if the impact of the sermon is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit there is resultant confusion around the agency of the preacher. Robert Reid comments,

> Historically, people who have risen to the occasion to speak of faith for their generation have been keenly aware of their own limitations, whether Moses who was "slow of speech" or Isaiah who was concerned that he spoke with "unclean lips." They question "Who am I to speak for God?" And we ask, in turn, is it they who spoke or simply God who spoke through them? ...[T]he question of homiletic agency is a reoccurring tensional issue for contemporary homiletic theory. What do we who 'have hope' believe happens in preaching? How much of what happens do we believe to be the work of God? What role is actually played by the

9 Ex 4:11

10 Ex 4:10-16; Is 6:1-6; Ez 3:4-11

11 Jl 2:28

12 Zep 3:9

13 Acts 2:6, 14-17

14 E.g. Lk 9:1,2; Mt 10:5-7; Acts 10:42; 1 Cor 2:4

15 Acts 10:44; Rom 10:17

16 1 Cor 2:11b NRSV

> preacher? And what are the implications of these questions as it applies to a preacher's desire to work for excellence (and for some—even effectiveness) in the task of preaching?[17]

In the crafting of the sermon it sometimes seems that the editorial work of the Holy Spirit is less effective than her inspiration. It is also apparent that some preachers seem to evoke a greater transformational response than others.

A theological viewpoint that emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching would seem naturally to lead to an emphasis on pastoral and faith formation in the training of preachers. However, the traditional seminary studies of Scripture, systematic theology, church history and philosophy reflect a knowledge-based model for sermon preparation. In more recent years, at least in Australia and North America, there has been an increase in emphasis on practical or pastoral theology. The study of homiletics has grown, and, in many places, rhetoric and communication theory have been a significant part of preparation for preaching.

From its very beginnings the Christian church has been aware of the use of rhetorical theory in public discourse. The society into which Paul was preaching was one with highly developed schools of rhetoric. In this context, Paul makes it clear that he is not using the wisdom of the era, but proclaiming Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom," he states, "but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power."[18]

Despite his protestations, Paul's argumentation can be analysed in terms of traditional rhetoric. However, the early church did seem to eschew the use of these tools of human wisdom, and Murphy suggests that "for a dozen centuries the Church was almost exclusively concerned with *what* to preach—not *how*."[19] In discussing the "ongoing waxing and waning of appreciation for the rhetorical

17 Robert Stephen Reid, "A Rhetoric Group Panel "'Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips': Homiletic Agency Re-Imagined for the 21st Century." Notes from the Convener" (from the proceedings of The Academy of Homiletics 2007 Annual Meeting. *Honoring the "Other": Preaching Across the Divides*, Minneapolis, MN, 2007).

18 1 Cor 2:4,5, 4:20

19 James J Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 282.

tools", Rogers states that the pendulum between the *what* and the *how* of preaching has "continued to swing back and forth" throughout the history of preaching.[20]

It is not that there is an essential dichotomy between the form of a sermon and the content of a sermon. One of the current prominent voices in homiletics, Thomas Troeger, posits that the attention to communication theory and design arises from "an awareness of the need for "strategies of grace" to facilitate the reception of the gospel."[21] However, one of the dilemmas in drawing on the insights of rhetoric or communication theory is that these tools are themselves value-free, with no intrinsic link to the faith being proclaimed. Techniques of persuasion can be used just as easily to manipulate as to elevate, to bind as to liberate.

When considering the teaching of preaching, attributing efficacy either to the work of the Holy Spirit or to the use of rhetorical or motivational devices is problematic. If agency is external to the preacher, nothing that can be learned will influence the effectiveness of the sermon. On the other hand, if efficacy is derived from the use of the tools of rhetoric or communication theory, how does this link to our faith? How would sermons be any different from advertising or motivational speeches?

An increasing emphasis in theological seminaries on pastoral formation or spiritual formation could be seen as addressing both of these dilemmas. The person who is well grounded in their own faith might be presumed to be attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and also to have developed an appropriate ethical stance and motivation so that the use of persuasive techniques is not abused. However, there are many faithful, incarnational ministers whose sermons seem less than transformational; this suggests that sound pastoral formation is not enough.

In the introduction to his volume on homiletical theory, Paul Scott Wilson recalls the "critics of preaching in various theological disciplines, many of whom

20 Thomas G Rogers, "What and How of North American Lutheran Preaching " *Dialog* 43, no. 4 (2004).

21 Thomas H Troeger, "A Poetics of the Pulpit for Post-Modern Times," in *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 49.

assume they can do little, if anything, to affect the quality of the sermons they hear." To their critique, he responds, "I assume that while preaching is a gift of the Holy Spirit, it nonetheless requires knowledge and skills that can be taught."[22] Is this knowledge and skill necessarily secular, or is it possible to discern "strategies of grace" that are somehow intrinsically tied to our faith in and relationship to God?

What we know of God is through God's actions in the world, so narrative is the logical form in which we speak of God. When reading literature about preaching, it is evident that story and preaching are somehow intimately connected. I wish to explore some of the insights of narrative epistemology or anthropology to see whether they suggest preaching strategies that integrate elements of faith and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with techniques or approaches that are amenable to being taught.

A "turn to the narrative"

In the early twentieth century, the emphasis on cognition that accompanied the wave of modernism turned the art of preaching toward an exercise in logic and persuasion. Preaching continued to reflect modernism's roots in the Enlightenment, with its humanistic belief that the application of reason would reveal truth, and its emphasis on progress, including intellectual and moral self-realisation.

In the second half of the century, homiletics joined philosophy, theology, psychology, political science and other disciplines in their critique of modernity, and, as in the other disciplines, began exploring narrative. In *The Renewal of Preaching*, an extended article published in 1969, David Randolph coined the phrase "the new homiletic." He described an approach to preaching where the sermon was seen to be an event, an encounter with the living God, rather than a logical treatise.[23] Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm attributes Fred Craddock with

22 Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson, Preaching and Its Partners (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 1.

23 David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

introducing this approach by bringing to North American homileticians the work of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs on the power of language.[24] She summarises:

> [Language] not only expresses or signifies meaning; it creates it. For human beings who speak, listen, preach, and hear something of Divine Being amid the discourse of human beings, preaching not only *signifies* the Word of God, it *participates in* the Word of God. Scripture ceases to be mere language and the interpretation of it in preaching becomes ... a word event as we encounter the living Word of God.[25]

In the unfolding of his article, Randolph named the civil rights movement of America as having improved the quality of preaching by rediscovery of the prophetic; he suggested that an appropriate approach to homiletics would be found in combining theology, ontology and communication studies. He went on to discuss story, dramatic form within the sermon, and the use of imagery—themes which have remained central to homiletics to the present.

The body of literature in homiletics has some fluidity in its use of the terms "narrative" and "story." "Narrative" is most often used to refer to the form of a story[26] or a pattern of development.[27] Others use it synonymously with story.[28]

There are phrases or sentences scattered through the literature which indicate intuitions or commonly agreed-upon understandings of the importance of narrative to individuals and societies. In attempting to articulate what made for good preaching, Eugene Lowry acknowledged that we have an "unconscious understanding of reality as meaningfully related pieces"[29] and suggested the narrative form as the basis for the sermon. Craddock had provided an entrée for

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24 Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, "New Hermeneutic, New Homiletic, and New Directions: An U.S. – North American Perspective," *Homiletic* 35, no. 1 (2010), 19.

25 Ibid, with the following footnote (6): "According to Ebeling, "Word of God" is encountered amid the dynamic engagement of the written words of Scripture and the church's proclamation. In this way, the Word moves in, through, and beyond the text and the words of the preacher. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W Leitch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1963)".

26 Eugene L Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

27 Robert G Hughes, "Narrative as Plot," in *Journeys toward Narrative Preaching*, ed. Wayne Bradley Robinson (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990) and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

28 Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoiesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). and Thomas G Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).

29 Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 122.

this approach in his development of Ebeling and Fuchs' work referred to earlier,[30] writing about inductive rather than deductive movement in sermons,[31] and the "sermonic moves" of David Buttrick[32] provided a further tool for developing narrative sermons. Sally McFague[33] and Mark Ellingsen[34] focus on metaphor and image as narrative devices.

Others have noted that story is a powerful medium for communication. Robert McAfee Brown wrote about "normative" stories and that hearing another's story changes the way we tell our own.[35] He drew attention to the way that Elie Wiesel had taken on "The [Scriptural] Story" in a very personal way. Ronald Allen and Thomas Herin talked about the preacher inviting others to make connections to the biblical story through embodying and experiencing the story.[36] Terrence Tilly named the importance of story for investigating and expressing religious faith and saw the church as being where Jesus' story continues.[37]

The role of narrative for the community is alluded to in Charles Rice's finding the identity of the Christian community grounded in story,[38] and Henry Mitchell's "transconscious apprehension of shared story".[39]

These and similar comments appear mostly as suppositions, or fleeting references. When homileticians have attempted an analysis of the power of story, they have tended to rely on communication theory (for example, Richard Jensen's use of McLuhan[40]) rather than drawing on insights of narrative from other

30 Page 7.

31 Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 57.

32 David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (London: SCM, 1987).

33 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

34 Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

35 Robert McAfee Brown, "My Story and 'the Story'," *Theology Today* 32(1975).

36 Ronald J Allen and Thomas J Herin, "Moving from the Story to Our Story," in *Preaching the Story*, ed. Edmund A Steimle, Morris J Niedenthal, and Charles L Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 152,61.

37 Terrence W Tilley, *Story Theology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985).

38 Charles Lynvel Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

39 Henry Mitchell, in *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method*, ed. Richard L Eslinger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 39-63.

40 Richard A Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, OH: CSS Pub Co, 1993).

disciplines. Much of the "how to" of writing a narrative sermon suggests either stitching together stories, or elongating the sermon into a story form, using metaphor and images.

These observations regarding the field of narrative homiletics mirror those made by Charles Campbell;[41] he proceeds to draw on the work of Hans Frei to suggest that the power of narrative for preaching is derived not from narrativity per se, but from the revelation of the identity of Jesus through the "interplay of character and incident."[42] Seeing in the narrative homiletic movement a focus on form rather than content, his suggestions for preaching are a call for reorientation to preaching's theological centre, the person and work of Jesus Christ.[43]

John McClure summarises the focus of the narrative homiletics movement of North America as "*Preaching in which some aspect of narrative exerts a controlling influence on the sermon."*[44] He distinguishes "four broad avenues" that those working in the area walk down:

1. narrative hermeneutics, where a sermon is developed through attention to the narrative elements of the biblical narrative;
2. narrative development, where the sermon follows a narrative form (as referred to above in the work of Lowry, Buttrick etc);
3. narrative enculturation, where elements "such as metaphor, synecdoche, or image" drawn from contemporary culture, are used to illustrate the central ideas of the sermon;
4. narrative worldview, where narrative analysis provides insight into how specific meta-narratives or worldviews are promoted through

41 Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New directions for homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Pub Co, 1997), 167-70.

42 Ibid, 198, citing Hans W Frei, "Barth and Schleiermacher: Divergence and Convergence" in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse,* ed James O Duke and Robert F Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 72.

43 Ibid, 201.

44 John S McClure, "narrative preaching" in *Preaching words: 144 key terms in homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 90.

preaching (as in the work of Campbell, referred to above, and Tisdale, mentioned below).[45]

Many of those writing on homiletics in the past thirty-five years have used narrative extensively; however, this has been narrative as genre… a technique… an approach… with no articulation of a narrative philosophical foundation. There has been little acknowledgement of the influence of post-modernity or thinking about the implications of a narrative epistemology for preaching; this is the specific arena to be addressed in this work.

In related fields of theological exploration, implicit narrative epistemologies can be found. James Hopewell's seminal work, *Congregation,* explores the interpretation of congregational stories through mythology and symbolism as a mode of strengthening the use of the stories, particularly to address organisational difficulties.[46] Understanding story as "the larger liturgy of the congregation"[47], he suggests drawing on the practical and performative aspects of narrative to address organisational difficulties, through restorying.[48] Leonora Tubbs Tisdale built on this work in *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art,* her initial exploration of exegeting the congregation through narrative, as preparation for preaching into the gaps within the community story.[49]

Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley discuss the intersection of the human and divine in story-telling and ritual:

> We are transformed in part because we begin to understand our particular story as part of a larger, transcendent narrative. God has chosen to coauthor a redemptive story for us and with us in human history, and in so doing has invited us to reshape radically the horizon of all other storytelling and ritual making.[50]

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45 Ibid, 90-93.

46 James F Hopewell, *Congregation Stories & Structures,* ed Barbara G Wheeler (SCM Press, London, 1988).

47 Ibid., 191

48 Ibid., 193

49 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as local theology and folk art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). John McClure applies a similar approach to the preacher's analysis of their own sermon collection, developing structural tools for the task. He explains these tools in "The Theo-symbolic Code", *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

50 Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 37.

Walter Brueggemann has articulated a version of a narrative epistemology, attributing to each of us a script by which we live. He suggests that "military consumerism" is the dominant influence on the script and states that the "task of ministry is to descript that script among us". [51] This resonates with John McClure's notion of "other-wise preaching"[52] and the writings of both parallel the narrative counselling exploration of the deconstruction of life-denying discourse.

Like Hopewell before them, the Alban Institute recently entered into a conversation with narrative theorists regarding the application of narrative to congregational leadership.[53] Among the key findings of the narrative project was that effective story-leaders were those who could "coordinate the power of stories to bring about inner change in people—their sense of identity and purpose, and outer change in the congregation—both in 'practice' and mission to the world".[54] Narrative frameworks and practice were found to be helpful in the reframing of "stuck" congregational stories and in integrating the various aspects of the work of a congregation or organisation (including the Alban Institute itself). Story-based approaches provide ways to explore organisational identity that encompass "personal lives, common life, and the community mission of a congregation."[55]

51 Walter Brueggemann, "Counterscript " *Christian Century* 122, no. 24 (2004). Neither in this article, nor a public lecture on the topic (available at http://soupiset.typepad.com/soupablog/Brueggemann_19_Theses.html, accessed 6/11/2011) did Brueggemann attribute the concept of the *script* to another. However, in *Cadences of home: preaching among exiles* (1st ed. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) he refers to Paul Ricoeur's use of "text"as written discourse. The foundation for Brueggemann's articulation of *schemata* is potentially found in a number of disciplines. He may have been influenced by the seminal work of Roger Schank and Robert Abelson at Yale: Roger C Schank and Robert P Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hilsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1977). Schank and Abelson used the phrase to refer to "frequently recurring social situations involving strongly stereotyped conduct" (Roger C Schank, "An early work in cognitive science" *Current Contents*, 38 (1989) 14) and the word "script" quickly developed into the concept that generic knowledge regarding sequences of actions provided the plans or themes for story-level understanding of life.

52 John S McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

53 The Alban Institute, "Narrative Leadership," http://www.alban.org/research.aspx?id=2998, accessed 21/9/2010.

54 The Alban Institute, "Key Findings of the Narrative Leadership Project," http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=6174, accessed 10/4/2011.

55 Ibid.

Narrative epistemology and preaching

This study applies a narrative framework and practice to preaching itself. A basic assumption of narrative epistemology is that we make meaning in our lives by the story we tell ourselves about our lives. From within this framework, I propose that the sermon may be conceptualised as contributing to the authoring of a personal narrative, with its very real life consequences for faith and action.

At one level, this is obvious. It is by living within and hearing the stories of our faith community that we come to know God. Brueggemann suggests that "… the imaginative, generative power of rhetoric offers to the hearer of [Scripture] a God not otherwise known or available or even—dare one say—not otherwise 'there.'"[56] At another level, agency is perhaps made clearer if we consider the sermon (or sermons) to be a significant contribution to the public discourse of the faith community. It could be considered that within the context of this discourse, the story-line of the Christian life is co-authored by the Holy Spirit and the individual or group.

A thesis such as this is not amenable to proof. Physicist Amanda Peet caught my attention when she said:

> The trouble is it's always difficult to say can you prove a theory, can you prove an idea? I think it's probably unwise to expect that to happen. All you can do is amass evidence that one way of thinking about a problem is elegant and economical and allows you to make predictions.[57]

She was referring to a theoretical framework that could embrace both general relativity and quantum theory, the interaction of the very large elements and the interaction of the very small elements of the universe as we can "observe" it. The dilemma is not entirely dissimilar to that of considering the interaction of two ontologically distinct beings—God and human—in the production of effective sermons. Nonetheless, by exploring the sermon through the narrative lens, I wish to see if helpful things might be discovered about the crafting of sermons and the

56 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 58.

57 Amanda Peet on *The Science Show,* ABC, 4/8/2010. http://www.abc.net.au/rn/scienceshow/stories/2010/2969213.htm#, transcript accessed 10/8/2010.

teaching of this craft.[58] I hope to find it an "elegant and economical" way to think about inspiration, creativity, imagination and transformation.

Bricolage

For the purpose of this exploration I intend to engage in an exercise of bricolage. Claude Levi-Strauss is generally attributed with introducing the word into the English language. In *The Savage Mind* he explores the characteristic patterns of mythological thought and proposes it as one of "two distinct modes of scientific enquiry: one roughly adapted to that of perception and the imagination: the other at a remove from it."[59] He uses the term bricolage to describe a way of processing information that originates from experience, and through the engagement of the imagination produces results based in those things pre-existing in the mind.[60] Holland Wilde's definition of *bricolage* as "to fiddle, tinker and, by extension to make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand (regardless of their original purpose)"[61] has been widely adopted, and represents well the approach I will take.

The French noun *bricoleur* refers to someone who uses whatever materials are available to complete a task. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, *bricolage*, the creation of the bricoleur, became the name for a research methodology that creates space for "the interweaving of viewpoints, for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and for borrowing ... where borrowing seems useful, richness enhancing, or theoretically heuristic."[62]

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58 As with any theoretical construct, there have been challenges made to the notion of a narrative epistemology. Galen Strawson, for example, argues from his self-perception of his inner life "Against Narrativity" (the title of his article in *Ratio* XVII (2004), 428-452) for an episodic psychological reality. The narrative epistemology taken as the foundation for this study is neither prescriptive, nor descriptive, but metaphorical. Its value is in its usefulness of application–in this instance within counselling and preaching–rather than its relationship to an individual's subjective reality.

59 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensee Sauvage)*, Nature of Human Society Series (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972), 15.

60 Ibid., 16.

61 Holland Wilde, "Cultural Farming: Bricolage, Surrealism, Parody," http://www.culturalfarming.com/home/Bricolage.html, accessed 29/5/2011. Wilde is summarising Norman Denzin's use of the term as referred to below. Wilde's phrase is quoted without citation in Wikipedia, and multiple sites quoting Wikipedia.

62 Egon G Guba and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), 197.

> The qualitative researcher as *bricoleur*, or maker of quilts, uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand (Becker, 1998, p.2). If the researcher needs to invent, or piece together, new tools or techniques, he or she will do so. Choices regarding which interpretive practices to employ are not necessarily made in advance.[63]

At one level I am engaging in bricolage by applying a tool (narrative practice) to a purpose for which it was not designed (preaching). At another level I am engaging in bricolage as a methodology which gives primacy to practical knowledge, and seeks "congruence of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowings".[64] It is characterised by deep inter-disciplinarity,[65] reflexiveness,[66] and pragmatic knowledge "judged by its degree of historical situatedness and its ability to produce praxis, or action."[67] Bricolage is a social-constructivist approach with an orientation described by John Heron and Peter Reason as a *participative inquiry* or *cooperative* paradigm.[68] It is a methodology that has congruence with the commitments and emphases of narrative practice.

Narrative practice is a mode of counselling and community engagement which has been developed as an extension of narrative philosophical ideas. It is a methodology that I have found to be highly effective in assisting people and families to find lasting solutions to problems that had brought them to counselling. I have seen the value of this practical application of a set of ideas

63 Denzin and Lincoln, "The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," 4, citing ; H S Becker, *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You Are Doing It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

64 John Heron and Peter Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1997), Table 1: 289 (reproduced in this work in the Appendix:214).

65 Joe L Kincheloe, "Describing the Bricolage: Conceptualizing a New Rigour in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (2001): 680. Kincheloe comments, "A fuzzy concept at best, *interdisciplinarity* generally refers to a process where discipline boundaries are crossed and the analytical frames of more than one discipline are employed for the researcher," 685.

66 Heron and Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," 274.

67 Guba and Lincoln, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," 187.

68 Heron and Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," 292. For a comparison of this paradigm with other qualitative research approaches, please see the Appendix (pages 217-8). The tables there reproduced are Heron and Reason's extension of those developed by Guba and Lincoln to summarise the basic beliefs inherent in qualitative research approaches (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism) (Table 1), and to summarise the positions taken within these frameworks on issues such as the nature of knowledge, position of the researcher, and what is to be valued (Table 2). Heron and Reason add the "participatory" column, and it is the participatory or cooperative research paradigm that is used in this work.

based on a narrative epistemology. Rather than engaging as a philosopher with the philosophical ideas of postmodernism, and more specifically, narrative anthropology or epistemology, I will reflect on those facets of this practical application of narrative ideas that may have relevance to preaching.

I will attend to specific elements of narrative practice, considering their application to preaching, explicating the epistemological basis and reflecting theologically upon them. It is my intention that this work be useful to those who preach, with a focus on the practical. I therefore seek to avoid, where possible, the use of specialist language or the reliance on previous knowledge of the epistemology. While I wish to avoid the use of jargon, one of the commitments of narrative practice is to use the words that people choose for themselves, and so I have often used quotations to summarise the work of others, rather than my own words. In addition, I retain some of the highly-descriptive idiosyncratic terms used within narrative practice, to embrace the fullness of the concept or practice to which they refer. To provide a foundation for this exercise, the first chapter will outline some basic concepts in narrative epistemology.

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CHAPTER ONE

MEANING AND IDENTITY THROUGH NARRATIVE

God made people because God loves stories.

paraphrased from Elie Wiesel

A narrative epistemology

The central concept to a narrative epistemology is that we draw our identity from and make meaning in our lives by the story we tell ourselves about our life.

This idea of the self as constructed through story can be found dancing in and out of philosophical thought for at least fifteen centuries. The Buddhist doctrine of *Anattavada* is a teaching that "nothing is permanent or unchangeable," not even the self, and that "when we look inside ourselves we find only fleeting mental events."[1] For David Hume, writing in 1739, *being* is constituted from impressions and ideas; the self is a construction of the imagination.[2] Paul Broks draws on the field of neuropsychology to describe a twenty-first century understanding of the storied self:

> From a neuroscience perspective we are all divided and discontinuous. The mental processes underlying our sense of self —feelings, thoughts, memories—are scattered through different zones of the brain. There is no special point of convergence. No cockpit of the soul. No soul pilot. They come together in a work of fiction. A human being is a story-telling machine. The self is a story. ...Who tells the story of the self? That's like asking who thunders the thunder or rains the rain. It is not so much a question of us telling the story as the story telling us.[3]

1 Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Anattavada".

2 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. The University of Adelaide (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2003), B 1.2.6, B 1.4.5. A significant part of Hume's argument for the immateriality of the soul, and therefore for the constructed nature of identity, was from the concept of the unity of the individual; this is diametrically opposed to narrative epistemology from recent centuries, which does not assume identity to be stable or singular.

3 Paul Broks, *Into the Silent Land: Travels in Neuropsychology* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), 41.

It is evident that while the idea of identity-through-story has a long history, there is no single path of development of a narrative epistemology. Neither is there a definitive narrative epistemology. Well articulated and distinct versions can be found within humanist, realist, phenomenological, constructivist, social constructionist and post-structural philosophical frameworks, and within many disciplines including semiotics, rhetorical and discourse analysis, psychodynamics, cognitive- and neuro-psychology, and critical theory.

My own entrée into thinking about narrative was through narrative practice. Narrative practice (otherwise known as narrative therapy) is a mode of counselling whose primary focus is on people's expressions of their experiences of life. Michael White, the originator of narrative practice, describes it as being

> premised on the idea that the lives and relationships of persons are shaped by: the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences: and certain practices of self and of relationship that make up ways of life associated with these knowledges and stories.[4]

This study explores how the avenues opened for exploration of a narrative epistemology by narrative practice may provide insight on the art of preaching. The philosophical basis briefly described here is therefore that which has informed narrative practice. It is a synthesis of ideas from a range of theorists in philosophy and the social sciences, grounded in a post-structural framework. The theoretical foundation was laid by Gregory Bateson with his ideas about the mind, and Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault in their exploration of the effect of language on notions of the self. Further influences include the social constructionist Kenneth Gergen, anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Barbara Myerhoff, and the psychologist Jerome Bruner.

As narrative practice continues to develop in an iterative cycle of application and reflection, additional ideas congruent with the core epistemology are explored. Michael White has recently incorporated ideas from Vygotsky[5] and in this study I refer to the work of Susanne Langer and Susan Aylwin.

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4 Michael White, "Narrative Therapy" on http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock//virtual/narrativ.htm , accessed 22 March 2003.

5 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York ; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 271.

The story we tell ourselves

The story we tell ourselves (or the story that tells us) is a vehicle through which we make sense of our experiences. All our experience of the world is interpreted experience. We cannot know objective reality. As Sharon Parks observes, "The human mind is not a very good transmitter but it is a powerful transformer, continually composing reality from the many elements of our experience."[6]

Gregory Bateson's investigation of the nature of mind suggests that we create the world we perceive through the set of beliefs we have acquired through our relationship with society and the world.[7] The narrative or linguistic development of this idea proposes the personal narrative as the vehicle for the reality so created, and the reflection of the set of beliefs. The linguistic and social context for the creation of the personal narrative is the network of discourses of the various communities in which we participate.

Wittgenstein explored the idea that language only communicates when we follow a set of mutually agreed upon rules, or set of background assumptions.[8] These background assumptions are often hidden, or taken for granted, and the "rules" of language communication are learned through immersion in the societal conventions and norms. At any specific time or in any specific societal or geographic location, particular discourses dominate. As the form of shared

6 Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston, MA.: Harvard Business School Pub., 2005), 219. Parks' work embraces many of the same elements as explored in this work, however without the same commitment to deep respect, and using some categories of systems thinking. In making the quoted comment, Parks refers to the work of Susanne Langer. In an early article, Langer writes, "Every experience is an interpretation, a formalization. Experience may come to us in most various forms – it must come in *some* form, of course, if we are to identify it at all as a particular "fact." But the form which an actual event takes for us, the fact we apprehend, is not necessarily *the* form which belongs to it. What we can experience is a *perspective,* a *"Gestaltung."* And any analysis we can make of reality is an analysis of such a perspective of some specific or special form – all our understanding is perception of some specific configuration." Susanne K Langer, "Facts: The Logical Perspectives of the World " *The Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 7 (1933): 183.

7 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), passim. Bateson proposes a cybernetic epistemology where the individual mind is a function of a complex of relationships (pp 461-465). The particular approach to narrative ideas that I am using draws insights from Bateson's epistemology but rejects the cybernetic model. The conclusions that can be drawn from Bateson, however, are consistent with narrative ideas: "to change basic, perception-determining beliefs … [a person] must become aware that reality is not necessarily as [one] believes it to be" (2).

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), remark 7.

intelligibility within our communities, and the framework used to filter and structure our experiences, they impact the development of both our belief system and our personal narrative.

The personal narrative is therefore both a relational and a political achievement. Our interpretation of experience is patterned by the discourse of our communities. Meaning is not an exclusively individual responsibility, but our stories and the knowledges[9] that they build on are created and negotiated within a set of relationships, communities and social structures.[10]

Different discourses or modes of expression will offer different positions to people. Different communities will privilege different discourses; some will be prescriptive, dominant cultural stories which may advantage or disadvantage specific people. The social structures and institutions of our communities and society shape the discourses available to us. Deriving meaning and our notion of reality from these discourses, our narrative will reflect the way we are positioned within society. We will be formed in different ways by the one story, depending on the subject position assigned by the discourse.

Our personal narrative is likely to be gender specific, and, within western cultures, highly individualized. The discourses of our community and society establish a set of possibilities, and ultimately our set of beliefs about the world. We pay attention to those elements of our experience that conform to this set of beliefs. The shape of the personal narrative will therefore be determined by the beliefs, values, customs and expectations we bring to it, and ultimately to the discourses available to us.

I might have a story about myself as "a good mother". Once I had conceived a child, the discourses available to me would have dictated embracing a story-line with this central theme. There are alternatives to the *good mother*, but any examples I would have had of these as a young woman would have been not acceptable to me or to the family and community that surrounded me. There are lots of messages within the discourses about a *good mother:* she will instantly

9 The word *knowledges* is used as a continuing reminder of the multi-faceted nature of our knowledge and experience of self and the world; this usage mirrors Michael White's.

10 Francis Jacques, *Difference and Subjectivity: Dialogue and Personal Identity* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Pr., 1991), 31.

love her child, will put the needs of her child above her own, will have a clean house and always be patient and caring.

The personal narrative is a collection of events expressed across a time dimension. Different configurations of or selections from the same collection of events can be brought together depending on our subject position. So there may be a number of "voices" contributing to the composition of our narrative, as "discursive expressions of different subject positions constituted in internalized conversations."[11]

The complexity of our experiences and the relationships between them mean that when we link them across time into a narrative, there are many strands and many sub-plots. These strands of story will not necessarily be coherent, or together constitute anything that can be interpreted as the essential person, or identity. We can expect dialogue between the various strands, and some strands of the story will be dominant within the personal narrative. There is always more than one way to tell a story.

In the Conclusion of *Time and Narrative Vol III,* Ricoeur reviews his argument regarding a narrative model for identity, its possibilities and limitations. David Wood reflects,

> One of the central products of narrative is to allow us to construct a narrative identity – both at the level of history (and e.g. the identity of a nation), and at the level of the individual life. This represents a considerable advance over accounts based on substance, or bodily continuity, or memory. But it is open to the objection that it makes identity somewhat unstable, insofar as many stories can be woven from the same material. Ricoeur treats this not as an objection but as a limitation... we might equally regard it as an advantage to have a model which can accommodate the contingency and revisability of identity...[12]

As my journey of mothering unfolded, there would be elements within my experience that reinforce the understanding of myself as a *good mother*. These might be related to things I actually do (keeping up with the laundry so there are

11 Luis Botella and Olga Herrero, "A Relational Constructivist Approach to Narrative Therapy," *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling and Health* 3, no. 3 (2000): 410.

12 David Wood, ed. *On Paul Ricoeur* (London; New York: Routledge,1991), 3,4. David Wood, Introduction to, discussing Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

always clean clothes for my baby or child), or feel (love for my child), and even things influenced by many factors outside of my parenting (a healthy child that is developing "normally"). Incidental comments from other significant people ("What a beautiful baby – and so contented!") may be incorporated into my story.

It is likely that within the variety of day to day experiences there are elements that do not fit the *good mother.* In pouring a cup of tea while holding my baby, I accidentally cause a steam burn to her foot. After a night of broken sleep I just want someone to take the baby away for a while. I may deal with the contradictory elements within my experience by deciding they are insignificant, or the result of circumstances beyond my control. As I elevate certain elements, and minimise others, this selective attention has the result of thickening the story-line of the *good mother*.

It may be that there are other dreams and motivations that don't seem to fit the *good mother* story well. If I become frustrated that I have not completed my degree or established a career, I may recall other story-lines within my personal narrative, for example, the *bright woman*, or I may pay attention to a thread about failure. It may also be that the discourses of my community offer other possibilities, perhaps that of *super woman*, who is both a *good mother* and works outside of the home. Or there may be alternative discourses to the dominant ones within my communities, for example story-lines about shared parenting or stay-at-home dads.

Changing discursive practices accompany and drive social change. As the feminist movement influenced the discourses of my communities of belonging, different interpretations became possible. To put my own desires ahead of my children's by, for example, resuming a degree, might no longer be seen as being neglectful of my children, but as providing a good example for them of reaching for a dream or working towards change. Changed discourse will change the personal narrative. The *good mother* story-line now embraces the idea that independent action is not necessarily selfish so there are possibilities for action and ways of thinking about the self beyond that initially prescribed. Identity, therefore, is fluid across time in response to changes in discourses as well as to the ebb and flow of relationships and experiences.

Within a narrative epistemology, individual and social identity is both the product and process of the construction of the self-narrative. As the process unfolds, events, themes and characters are selected for inclusion in the narrative. Various aspects of experience are privileged or silenced. Authorship creates identity. Just as there is always more than one way to tell a story, there is no single, fixed story which correlates to our identity. Mary Catherine Bateson explains,

> In the postmodern environment in which we live, it is easy to say that no version is fixed, no version true. I want to push beyond that and encourage you to think about the reactive responsibility involved in the fact that there are different ways to tell your stories. Its not that one is true and another is not true. It's a matter of emphasis and of context.[13]

It is evident, therefore, that within a narrative epistemology there is no assumption about human identity as being unified or singular, or even about it being autonomous. If social or individual identity is draw from our personal narrative, the multi-faceted nature of the narrative implies that human identity is subject to contradiction and change.[14] As the personal narrative is negotiated with our community and society, identity is being constantly redefined in response to the discursive interactive activities of everyday life, and the subject positions taken at any particular time.

The traditions of our culture are embedded within the discourse available to us, so the personal narrative will also link us beyond our contemporary community, to our forebears. In addition to linking us to influences that have shaped our family and community in the past, the lived narrative also shapes the continuing discourses and thereby links us also to those not-yet born into our community.

Identity—our perception of the self—is thus understood to be a social construct, with its meaning and boundaries being constantly renegotiated and

13 Mary Catherine Bateson, "Composing a Life," in *Sacred Stories*, ed. Charles Simpkinson and Anne Simpkinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 42.

14 Kenneth J Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

redefined, depending on circumstances.[15] Within the individualised discourses of my particular society I will find my identity as an individual within a community. For other societies the group identity will be dominant, as expressed in the African notion of *ubuntu*, "I am a person through other persons" or "I am because we are," and the personal narrative one which views the self as one of a group. The observation has been made that for people within these societies, "questions relating to self often alienate people. They crudely crash through the sensitivities in communal based and extended family cultures."[16]

Our lives and relationships are shaped by and performed in association with the knowledges and stories embraced within our personal narrative. This does not imply a determinism in relation to identity formation, as no story can embrace all the contingencies of life. When confronted by inconsistencies, ambiguities or contradictions the narrative is adapted and renewed as the person actively pursues the making of meaning.

In summary, the major features of this version of a narrative epistemology are:

1. That we make sense of the world and find meaning in our lives through the story we tell ourselves;
2. the story is multi-stranded, and we pay attention selectively to events, which reinforce the dominant strands within our story;
3. the story is negotiated with our culture, society and community, within a web of relationships;
4. we live within and perform the story;
5. our knowledge of the world is from within the framework of the story;
6. our knowledge of our self is from within the framework of the story;
7. the story is constantly adapted and renewed.

15 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature; V. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

16 Charles Waldegrave et al., *Just Therapy—a Journey: A Collection of Papers from the Just Therapy Team, New Zealand* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2003), 151.

The story that tells us

This epistemology contrasts with a structuralist or modernist account of the person. According to a structuralist description, "people's expressions of living are taken to be behaviours that are surface manifestations of particular elements or essences. It is generally accepted that these elements of essences can be discovered by plumbing the depths of people's lives."[17] Identity is understood to be associated with the core of being, the "self".

The surface/depth dichotomy and the introspective search into the depth of the self is explored in classical philosophy (Plato, Descartes, Pascal, Kant) and religion (St Paul, Augustine, Luther).[18] The structuralist project has been very successful in western culture, where it is now widely accepted that the self resides in some kind of permanent deep structure, and self-realisation, self-awareness and self-expression are all appropriate goals for the modern individual. The unconscious is perceived to be a truer expression of the inner core than known motivations or verbal expressions of the self. Phrases commonly heard within our culture such as "being true to oneself" reflect a version of these ideas.

One implication of these ideas is that if the actions and experiences of one's life are surface manifestations of an inner core, for understanding or desired change the individual must seek the assistance of someone who has expert knowledge in interpreting the surface manifestations to reach understanding of the depth; the deep structures are not accessible to the individual self. "This requirement leads to the production of theories, to the construction of systems of analyses founded on these theories that can be laid over people's lives, and to the development of professional techniques of remediation that will fix whatever it is that is amiss at the centre of their identity."[19] By contrast, in a narrative

17 Michael White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 61.

18 William C French and Robert A Di Vito, "The Self in Context: The Issues," in *The Whole and Divided Self: The Bible and Theological Anthropology*, ed. David E Aune and John McCarthy (eds) (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 25.

19 White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews*, 61.

framework, expressions of one's lived experience are thought to "constitute our lives."[20]

Rather than notions of "surface" and "depth", in narrative descriptions the metaphors "thick" and "thin", are utilized.[21] "Thick descriptions" of the rich, unique, multi-storied nature of our existence are contrasted to "thin conclusions" encompassing generalisations and essentialist notions of the self.

Bruner, in discussing text, speaks of the "landscape of action" and the "landscape of consciousness" within a story.[22] In the landscape of action the narrative unfolds thematically across time. In the landscape of consciousness the reader attributes meaning. Extending the metaphor into the personal narrative, in the *landscape of action* events and decisions and characteristics can be viewed within a temporal framework.[23] In the *landscape of consciousness* (sometimes called the landscape of identity) perceptions, thoughts, realisations, speculations and conclusions are found.

When elements within the landscape of consciousness become sufficiently elaborated we become committed to them and the life-style they suggest. So not only do we story our lives, but we also live within these stories, "performing" them. Our knowledge of the world and of our selves is premised within our story.[24]

Narrative practice

This particular rendering of a narrative epistemology is drawn from narrative practice, as will be the ideas being applied to the crafting of sermons, so it may be helpful here to further contextualise this study with a brief description of that therapeutic mode.

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20 Michael White, "Michael White and the Narrative Perspective in Therapy," (Atlanta: transcript distributed by Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, 1993), 3.

21 Clifford Geertz is generally attributed with this metaphor having used it within his anthropological work, e.g. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Geertz borrowed the metaphor from Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), and it is now widely used within poststructuralist inquiry.

22 Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1986), 46ff.

23 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 81.

24

Even as children we knew it was not true that "words will never hurt me …". Words and expressions have real impact in the lives of people, as the "sticks and stones" contributing to the shaping of the personal and communal narrative. The description of ourselves embedded in the personal narrative may promote proficiency and wellness, or may constrain and minimise our sense of competence. The prevailing or dominant story of our life determines the nature of our lived experience.

The personal narrative may be one which provides scope for a rich and full life, or it may be one that creates less space for interaction with the world, or it may impoverish life and experience. The woman who is immersed in the social reality of her communities and carries the beliefs and expectations of a *good mother* may find herself unhappy in the role, or with a child that has special needs, or without support from others; she may compare herself or her child to the cultural stories and conclude that she is a failure. Even for someone that has felt competent and secure in their mothering, something may happen that means attention becomes selectively focussed on those things that contribute to a sense of failure or of discontent, building a narrative that is life-denying.

A group of Middle Eastern refugees living at this time, in my country, is likely to have its narrative much influenced by the dominant discourse of the wider society which features a one-dimensional description. While discourses from the community-of-origin of the group may have room for a thick and rich description, this may be overlooked by the group as it seeks to find its place in relationship to its host society.

Again, if someone has grown up being told they are "a lazy, useless" individual, it is possible that any experience that contradicts this will be minimised, and any events that reinforce that evaluation will be accepted as normative.

Within a therapeutic framework, the narrative practitioner seeks to aid the person to deconstruct totalising descriptions, and assumptions and practices that subjugate, objectify or remove agency from the person's own life. The word "deconstruction" is used within narrative therapy in a way that is similar but not identical with its use by Derrida. Michael White states,

> According to my rather loose definition, deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; those so-called "truths" that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of people's lives. Many of the methods of deconstruction render strange these familiar and everyday taken-for-granted realities and practices by objectifying them. [25]

By asking questions that invite a focus on other plots or alternative themes within the personal discourse, possibilities for action, for change, for repositioning the self are opened up.

One basic assumption made is that problems are external to persons, that difficulties are not the result of some truth about a person's identity or character.[26] Because they are not the result of some deficit of person, there is space to examine and revise one's relationship to the problem. The narrative practitioner collaborates with those consulting them in the co-authoring of a revised personal narrative, using a range of techniques to scaffold the traces of preferred story-lines. Beliefs and values are drawn upon, and the imagination engaged.

Imagery

A social constructionist orientation focuses attention on language, on the shared expressions of our lives and our communities. Narrative practice necessarily operates through the use of language. However, intuition and experience would suggest that alongside the language elements of the personal narrative are accompanying images. The background theoretical writings of the key narrative practitioners do not explore imagery, but recalling images and using the imagination are an important part of their application of the ideas. It is congruent with the epistemology I have been describing to suggest that imagery operates in tandem with language in the narrative formation of identity and meaning.

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25 From David Epston and Michael White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1992), 121.

26 Michael White, "The Externalizing of the Problem and the Re-Authoring of Lives and Relationships," in *Selected Papers*, ed. Michael White (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1989).

Susan Aylwin builds on the work of Jerome Bruner to include visual and "enactive"[27] imagery alongside linguistic representations of reality to carry our interpretive relationship with the world. Further, both Aylwin and Langer propose a tight connection between imagery and emotion. As Fleckenstein summarises, "To engage in imagistic thinking is to feel. Such a characteristic forces us to contend with the emotional causes and consequences of our actions. Imagery contextualises action within the warp and woof of beliefs, intentions, and desires."[28]

I therefore add an additional point to the summary of a narrative epistemology itemised above:

8. Images interact with and are embedded within the personal narrative, connecting it to emotions and dreams.

In Chapter Four the linkages between imagery and narrative ways of knowing will be further explored in the context of the use of metaphor and image in the sermon.

My story and The story

While a narrative epistemology has not been widely applied to practical theology, its thread is woven throughout the foundational documents of the church. The Hebrew scriptures encompass a view of humanity that resonates with a narrative perspective. In contrast to the individualistic focus of western culture and the "essential being" of modernism, the society represented in the scriptures is one that not only recognises the connectedness of human identity, but

> the only reality is the socially "embedded self", the one who is identified essentially, both for oneself and for others, by membership in a particular father's "house," a particular clan, or a particular village. And it is to the roles and practices that constitute the stuff of these groups' social life that one must look to locate where an individual, according to the OT, finds value and meaning – not to a "self" whose authenticity somehow lies in the disavowal of any and all social roles. For even as these structures of family

27 Susan Aylwin, *Structure in Thought and Feeling* (London; New York: Methuen, 1985), 16.

28 Kristie S Fleckenstein, "Images, Words and Narrative Epistemology," *College English* 58, no. 8 (1996): 921.

> and kin define who one is, they determine also the totality of one's obligations and duties.[29]

As in a post-structuralist account of identity, humanness is defined in terms of relationship, culture and history, given meaning within a story. Brueggemann comments that "The Old Testament has no interest in articulating an autonomous or universal notion of humanness … because its articulation of what it means to be human is characteristically situated in its own Yahwistic, covenantal, interactionist mode of reality." [30]

Such resonance is less obvious with the New Testament. During the inter-testamental period the adoption of Greek philosophical ideas transformed the view of humanity to a much more individualistic one. While the Gospels can be read through a narrative epistemological lens, Paul's concern for the inner life seems antithetical to it.

Yet, while Augustine's introspective autobiography dwells on the same concern, [31] in *The Story of the Self, and the Self of the Story,* James E Giles provides an analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* from a narrative epistemology. Giles states that Augustine's focus on the self as an imaging of God establishes the self as the "nexus of continually changing relationships. For Augustine, there is no untouched and immutable self standing behind the turmoil and trouble of life. The self is always becoming." [32] Under the ever changing influence of a web of relationships, what is needed is not self-knowledge, but "self-patterning or self-order."[33]

Despite such resonances, using a narrative epistemology to explore preaching might be seen as paradoxical. Post-modern thought challenges the

29 Robert A Di Vito, "Here One Need Not Be Oneself: The Concept of "Self" in the Hebrew Scriptures," in *The Whole and Divided Self*, ed. David E Aune and John McCarthy (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 58.

30 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 450.

31 Augustine, *Confessions [of] Saint Augustine*, Translated with an Introduction by RS Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961).

32 James Giles, "The Story of the Self: The Self of the Story.," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 4, no. 1 (1986): 108.

33 Ibid., 111.

notions of universal truths or metanarratives, and seeks to deconstruct privileged discourses.[34] Catrina Brown describes the postmodern approach to truth this way:

> For postmodernism, there is no one truth, no one universal, discoverable truth that exists outside human existence. There is no stable, fixed, knowable or essential self or identity, as self and identity can emerge only within linguistic, cultural, and relational practices. Truth is only ever partial, located and invested. What we take for granted to be true, reasonable, and normative are in fact social constructions that emerge within social and historical contexts and cannot be separated from human meaning-making processes.[35]

Preaching has often been seen as a norming activity, proclaiming universal truth and reinforcing privileged discourse, and the Christian church has often been seen as one of the oppressive forces within society.

These claims have not just been made from outside of the church, but have been the focus of prophetic critique from within and about Israel and the church through the ages. Merold Westphal suggests that postmodernism's rejection of metanarrative is "unintended commentary … on the doctrine of the fall."[36] He sees a parallel between postmodernism's deconstructive efforts and prophetic judgment on human/societal practices and self-justification.

Key practitioners in narrative therapy also reject the notion that "incredulity about meta-narrative" leads to moral relativism. Michael White argues that no "constructionist position … can escape a confrontation with questions of values and personal ethics. In fact, according to my understanding, the constructionist position emphasizes these questions, and elevates this confrontation."[37] He summarises as the guiding ethic for the work of the practitioner, "a version of responsibility which supports a commitment to identifying and addressing the real effects or consequences of one's actions in the

34 Jill M S W Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1996), 38.

35 Catrina Brown and Tod Augusta-Scott, *Narrative Therapy: Making Meaning, Making Lives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), xv.

36 Merold Westphal, "Blind Spots Christianity and Postmodern Philosophy," *Christian Century* 120, no. 12 (2003): 34.

37 Michael White, *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995), 14.

lives of others."[38] Narrative practitioners therefore have a commitment to personal and societal liberation that mirrors the commitment of those whose understanding of God and the mission of the church is from a feminist/liberationist perspective.

Through the lenses of a narrative epistemology, the Christian life may be viewed as being one where the personal narrative intersects or is embraced by a larger transcendent narrative. Sermons contribute to the network of discourses which provide the context for the personal narrative. Given the individualised nature of Australian culture, and the nature of the church community, we can anticipate that the sermon is part of the authoring of at least two narrative levels: the individualised personal narrative, and the narrative of the assembled faith community, which in turn influences the individual. These two levels are at work in whichever cultural context one is preaching, with the role of the individual versus the group in that particular place determining the balance between the two levels.

At the beginning of this study an effective sermon was defined as being one that brings liberation and transformation, and assists the orientation of the individual and group towards living out the Gospel call to freedom and justice. Rephrasing that definition, I propose that one way to think about the process of designing and preaching an effective sermon is that it is one that enriches or thickens those strands of the personal story linking the individual or group to God's narrative of liberation and transformation.

As human beings our orientation is towards finding a meaningful understanding of the world and our place within it. Bartlett (1932) defined human psychological processes as "effort after meaning".[39] "Meaning is produced through … the way that language is used to convey thoughts, emotions and histories,"[40] with the personal narrative providing a framework through which our interaction with the world is interpreted—through which we attribute meaning. Through the metaphorical language we use about God and God's relationship with humanity, sermon makers are therefore assisting the creation of meaning

38 White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews*, 150.

39 Frederic C Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 20.

40 A C (Tina) Besley, "Foucault and the Turn to Narrative Therapy," *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 30, no. 2 (2002): 132.

rather than simply reflecting it. The space between the words enables people to give new meaning to their experiences, meaning which is transformative, liberating.

In the congregation on any specific occasion will be people at many different points on their faith journey. Some may not have yet encountered the living God, so an effective sermon will be one that somehow enables the connecting up of events and stories into something that becomes a visible thread within the personal narrative. Without the preacher knowing the particulars of an individual's life or experience, somehow the moments that are seen in retrospect to have been times when their story has crossed over the path that is God's story become connected through what is being said or lived.

An effective sermon for the person who has been immersed in the Christian community and story, but who knows only guilt or shame in their relationship to that story will be one that can deconstruct the life-denying elements of religion that they have knitted into their story. An effective sermon for the person who has known grace as God's gift will be one that assists them to live their preferred path.

Whatever the circumstances, the image of enriching and thickening of strands is one that applies. Through the words of a sermon or the life of a community, the butterfly kisses of the transcendent are taken and spun into cobwebs of connection, thickened into threads of relationship and brought together to form a strong rope of commitment.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE SPACE BETWEEN THE WORDS

Life isn't about finding yourself. It's about creating yourself.

George Bernard Shaw

Making meaning

One of the most influential psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century, Sir Frederic Bartlett, theorised that the defining characteristic of the mental processes of human beings was "effort after meaning";[1] humans seek to give meaning to their experiences and make sense of their lives. This postulation is now so commonplace that companies selling used cars or mining uranium are concerned to make customer interactions "meaningful experiences."[2]

In order to interpret our experience in a meaningful way, we need some kind of framework to provide a context for our interpretive efforts. A narrative epistemology assumes that the framework and process for these efforts after meaning is the collection of stories we tell ourselves about our life—the personal narrative. David Epston defined story as

> a unit of meaning that provides a frame for lived experience. It is through these stories that lived experience is interpreted. We enter into stories; we are entered into stories by others; and we live our lives through these stories. Stories enable persons to link aspects of their experience through the dimension of time ... it is through stories that we obtain a sense of our lives changing.[3]

In the therapeutic context, a narrative approach focuses on the meaning that elements of the personal narrative have for the individual. In the counselling room, strands of the personal narrative can be explored for the meaning given them and the hopes and dreams, disappointments and frustrations they reflect.

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1 Frederic C Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 20.

2 For example, http://www.makingmeaning.org/index.html "In a market economy characterized by commoditized products and global competition, how do companies gain deep and lasting loyalty from their customers? The key is in providing meaningful customer experiences."

3 David Epston, Michael White, and Kevin Murray, "A Proposal for Re-Authoring Therapy," in *Therapy as Social Construction*, ed. S McNamee and Kenneth J. Gergen (London: Sage, 2002), 91.

However, the context of the sermon is quite different. A group of diverse individuals are gathering to listen to a monologue. It is not at all obvious that proclamation by one privileged voice can be the occasion for intentionality in the making of meaning.

Some homileticians and preachers have responded to this apparent dilemma by finding ways to bring the reflections of others to the crafting of the sermon. It has been suggested that interactive sermons may have been the norm in the early days of the Christian church, prior to the professionalisation of the clergy.[4] It would be more common now for a preacher to have "virtual" interaction, by bringing to mind specific members of the congregation to think about how they would receive and react to the words that are being crafted. Harry Emerson Fosdick stated:

> A wise preacher can build his sermon that it will be, not a dogmatic monologue but a co-operative dialogue in which all sorts of things in the minds of the congregation—objections, questions, doubts, and confirmations—will be brought to the front and fairly dealt with. This requires clairvoyance on the preacher's part as to what the people are thinking, but any man who lacks that has no business to preach anyway.[5]

His own method brought "diverse and competing voices" into the sermon as he explored various attitudes to the topic on which he was expounding.[6]

It is probably the intention of most preachers to bring the everyday lives of their parishioners, as revealed through pastoral encounters, into dialogue with the text in their preparation. Others bring together weekly gatherings of parishioners to discuss the texts. John McClure, in *The Round-table Pulpit,* traces the origin of "collaborative sermons" to Browne Barr who used a seminar process towards sermon preparation and developed it into a central element of his lay ministry program.[7] Other homileticians and preachers saw collaborative preaching as a means of stimulating congregational interest, as part of parish dialogue, or as a

4 William D Thompson and Gordon C Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching: The Shared Sermon* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 17.

5 Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 13.

6 Ibid., 14.

7 John S McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 7.

way to better contextualise the application of Scripture to the social conditions of the present day.[8]

McClure's own development of the concept suggests an intentional process of bringing the voices of the congregation to the sermon as part of developing collaborative leadership. A regularly changing group of parishioners is invited to bring their diverse experience to the task of wrestling with the text and with finding mutual understanding, as preparation for, and feedback after the sermon. There are five key concepts to McClure's methodology:

1. the preacher is to act as host, opening "access to the pulpit to those whose interpretations and experiences may be very different";
2. over time the sermons delivered within the congregation will reflect most of those who participate in the life of the congregation, the congregation's history and its broader heritage;
3. no specific voice—not even that of the preacher—is privileged;
4. the conversation is deliberately open-ended, with a continuity from week to week and regardless of change in participants;
5. the conversation is purposeful, an occasion where "the meaning and direct implications of the gospel for the congregation are being proposed."[9]

Doug Pagitt, pastor of the Solomon's Porch congregation in Minneapolis, uses the phrase "progressional dialogue" to refer to the approach he takes to preaching within his "emergent" congregation.[10] The emergent church movement has an emphasis in its worship life on broad participation, variety and practicality, as it seeks to find new expressions of spiritual formation through community.[11] An attitude rather than a technique, the progressional dialogue approach incorporates

8 Ibid., 7-8.

9 Ibid., 52.

10 Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 24.

11 Doug Pagitt and Solomon's Porch Community, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2005), 7.

> the sermon preparation, which involves in-depth conversation with a group of other people from the church, and the weekly open discussion that happens during the sermon – I talk for a while and then invite others to share their ideas, input, and thoughts about what's been said.[12]

The values which form these various styles of developing and delivering a sermon are congruous with the collaborative values of narrative practice. This study will not, however, explore these methodologies more fully, but remain focussed on what might be learned from narrative practice about the monologic sermon, as it remains the norm.

On the surface, listening to a sermon would seem to have little in common with the conversational interaction between client and counsellor. There are, however, some preachers who understand the sermon as a type of group counselling. Fosdick, quoted above regarding dialogue in sermons, was the dominant force in the development of this movement within America's mainline liberal churches, building on the modernist project of human progress and fulfilment. In his famous 1928 article in *Harper's Magazine*, "What is the matter with preaching?" he argued that

> every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem—a vital, important problem, puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives—and any sermon which thus does tackle a real problem and throw even a little light on it, and help some individuals practically to find their way through it cannot be altogether uninteresting.[13]

He believed the sermon should be constructed around the perceived needs of the congregation, stating, "All this is good sense and good psychology. Everybody else is using it from first-class teachers to first-class advertisers. Why should so many preachers continue in such belated fashion to neglect it?"[14]

His belief that preaching is, or includes, pastoral counselling is revealed in these statements. Edmund Linn summarises his attitude to preaching as it developed further: "By application of the principles of personal counseling to preaching, the counseling sermon becomes no less a technique for the

12 Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*, 11.

13 Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?," 8.

14 Ibid., 12.

transformation of persons than actual counseling itself." Those who preach do so, "expecting that lives will be made over, families will be saved, young people will be directed into wholesome paths, potential suicides will become happy and useful members of society, and doubters will become vibrant believers."[15]

Australia's recent exemplar of preaching-as-counselling is Dr Francis McNab, a Uniting Church minister at St Michael's UCA, Collins St, Melbourne. A psychotherapist, clinical psychologist and group therapist, he contends, in a radio interview with John Cleary,

> Religion needs to do what it does, but it's been a therapeutic … experience from way back. If you go into New Testament times, the basic teaching was people finding a way to be made whole, salvation in its basic sense means to be made healthy and whole. At root, the church is a therapeutic experience. Some people speak of my pulpit as a therapeutic pulpit. I hope it is… The objective is always towards growth, health, happiness, wellbeing.[16]

In my introduction I stated that I believed sermons mattered, because they could make a positive difference. However I do not believe the objective of the sermon is "personal growth, health, happiness [and] wellbeing" per se. While it may be hoped that these things flow from the transformative difference found in relationship with God and God's grace, the sermon is not a self-help or therapeutic endeavour, but the site of an encounter with the living God.

In contrast to NcNab's approach, J Randall Nichols' integration of preaching and counselling arises out of an understanding that restoration is essential to both preaching and pastoral counselling.[17] In *The Restoring Word: preaching as pastoral communication* Nichols invites the preacher to recognise "the power and influence of preaching in people's living and growing."[18]

The reason for drawing on the insights of narrative practice is not because sermons are a type of counselling, but for the way narrative practice applies

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15 Edmund Holt Linn, *Preaching as Counseling: The Unique Method of Harry Emerson Fosdick* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1966), 16.

16 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "The Secularity of Religion: Transcript 2nd June 1999," ABC, http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/relrpt/stories/s27641.htm, accessed 12/4/2008.

17 J Randall Nichols, *The Restoring Word: Preaching As Pastoral Communication* (San Franciso: Harper & Row, 1987).

18 Ibid, publishers' summary.

insights regarding words and their support to the development of meaning. In many ways the relationship between author and reader parallels that between preacher and listener. In developing his narrative approach to therapeutic practice, Michael White drew extensively on the work of Jerome Bruner regarding works of literary merit. He echoes Bruner in claiming the "contribution of literature to the creation of new possibilities and new realities; to the making of new worlds."[19] Bruner states, in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds:*

> Stories of literary merit, to be sure, are about events in the real world, but they render that world newly strange, rescue it from obviousness, fill it with gaps that call upon the reader … to become a writer, a composer of a virtual text in response to the actual. In the end it is the reader who must write for himself what he intends to do with the actual text.[20]

When I put down a satisfying book, the story has changed me. The gaps in the story line create space that I fill, drawing on my own experience. In this interaction of the story with my own experience new meanings and altered awareness may be created.

In his early work, *As One Without Authority,*[21] Fred Craddock alluded to this process in his encouragement to preachers to construct sermons inductively. A traditional sermon structure will begin with assumptions then follow a logical path through a deductive process to a conclusion. The congregation was expected to follow the argument and by force of rational logic assent to its conclusions. Craddock called for a return to orality in sermons, to a form of sermon that mirrored speech and took seriously the listener. At the time of his writing some were experimenting with various kinds of contrived dialogical sermons, but Craddock pointed instead to an inductive method—beginning with the concrete and specific and moving towards a general truth. He suggested that an effective sermon would be one with "incompleteness, a lack of exhaustiveness"[22] which would invite the hearers to follow a similar inductive journey that the preacher had traversed when working with the text. They would thereby complete the

19 Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W W Norton, 1990), 155.

20 Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1986), 24.

21 Fred B Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3 ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

22 Ibid., 64.

sermon themselves, drawing conclusions of relevance to their own lives.[23] In the interaction of the sermon with the experience of the listeners, new meanings and altered awareness may be created.

> On the basis of these concrete thoughts and events, by analogy and by the listener's identification with what he hears, conclusions are reached, new perspectives are gained, decisions made. This experienced and experienceable material is not to be regarded simply as illustrative any more than a man's life is to be lightly handled as an illustration of something. This is the stuff of the sermon and its reality lies in its specificity.[24]

Transformational moments

While it is not unknown for new perspectives derived from a sermon to be truly life-changing, it is reasonable to assume that in the interaction between sermon and listener these moments of insight would be generally characterised as formational rather than as transformational. Rather than an exhausting turmoil of iterative events of metanoia, the impact of effective sermons is more likely to be gentle nudges that shape the Christian life.

There have been a number of theoretical proposals within practical theology that attempt to map the process by which significant insight—Craddock's "conclusions" and "new perspectives"—come into being. While not dismissing the work of the Spirit in the life of the individual, these theories utilise knowledge of human psychological processes in an attempt to find ways to assist spiritual development or insight. The language used in these proposals is that of transformation, but it is expected that exploration of the process of life-changing events may throw light on the process behind the smaller flashes of insight.

In *The Knight's Move,* James Loder describes his theory of transformation. The "grammar" of transformation proceeds from conflict, through "incubation" or "the search for prototypes or patterns that can resolve the conflict" through a stage of "mediating insight" to a "release of energy and phenomenological insight" which finds "verification" via "some kind of public or private affirmation of the solution or change."[25] The sequential stages of Eugene

23 Ibid., 63, 64.

24 Ibid., 61-62.

25 James E Loder and W Jim Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 253-4.

Lowry's pattern for sermon design follows a similar design, with some kind of reversal designed to elicit the "mediating insight" (Loder) or "Aha!" (Lowry).[26]

Within the metaphor of the narrative epistemology, when the individual is confronted by inconsistencies, ambiguities or contradictions the person actively pursues the making of meaning, bringing about the possibility that the personal narrative might be adapted or revised. The theories of both Loder and Lowry can be interpreted through this narrative lens.

Gregory Bateson proposed that for people to change deeply held beliefs or perceptions about the world, they needed first to become aware of a gap between what they believed to be reality, and the evidence of their experience.[27] Loder's theory identified "conflict" as the opening phase of transformation: inconsistencies, ambiguities or contradictions between new or differently understood experience and the personal narrative. Lowry's "homiletic plot" approach begins with "upsetting the equilibrium,"[28] in which the aim is to "trigger ambiguity in the listeners' minds. Such an ambiguity is not known as a simple intellectual matter; it is a mental ambiguity which is existentially felt."[29]

In Lowry's scheme, as the sermon develops, the congregation is invited to share reflection around the dilemma, the "analysing the discrepancy" stage of the homiletical plot;[30] this parallels the "incubation" stage of transformational thought. In narrative terms, the listener might thus be led to wander through their store of experiences, images or alternative story-lines. The "mediating insight"[31] is found, or produced via the "clue to resolution",[32] so that the resolution to the dilemma is found from within the resources available to the individual. A narrative reframing of the contexts given by each of these authors is that this will most probably be found in the intersection of God's story with the personal

26 Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 26.

27 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: A Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 292.

28 Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, 28-38.

29 Ibid., 35.

30 Ibid., 39-52.

31 Loder and Neidhardt, *The Knight's Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science*, 253.

32 Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, 53-73.

narrative. This brings about the constitution of new meaning: for Lowry, "experiencing the Gospel"[33]; for Loder, "transformation". Loder's process moves into verification of the phenomenological insight. Lowry's process projects application of the insight into the future, in "anticipating the consequences."[34]

The trajectory of a narrative therapeutic session may follow a similar path. In this setting, "conflict" or "disequilibrium" walk through the door with those seeking assistance. The practitioner will use questioning to elicit some clarity regarding the *problem,* disentangling it from the people it has accompanied. It is likely that the influence of *problem* in the lives of those seeking assistance will then be explored further (cf "incubation" or "analysing the discrepancy"). As part of this exploration, the practitioner will be keeping alert for any chink in the story being presented which may give access to an alternative account. This "clue to resolution" or "mediating insight", known in narrative practice as a *unique outcome*, or *sparkling moment*, provides the pivot point from which an alternative story might be co-constructed by those in the counselling room. This reauthored story will be one where the influence of the problem has significantly decreased. It may be strengthened through "verification" in some public way, or perhaps by anticipating its future history.

Those seeking counselling do so because they seek change in their lives: something problematic brings them through the door. While they may not conceptualise what they are looking for as a journey of meaning making, a narrative approach utilises meaning making resources to bring the sought-for change. At a theological level, those attending worship also come with something problematic in their lives or relationships. A central Christian concept is that the relationship between God and humanity has been broken by human sin.[35] Reflected in the liturgical traditions of the church is the iterative approach to God for mercy and forgiveness, to receive the reconciliation effected through the Christ.[36] For Martin Luther, that we have been baptised "signifies that the old creature in us … is to be drowned and die through *daily* … repentance, and …

33 Ibid., 74-79.

34 Ibid., 80-81, 86-87.

35 E.g. Rom 5:10, 12

36 2 Cor 5:18-19

that *daily* a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."[37]

It may be that some—perhaps even many—of those who attend public worship carry a sense of the problematic when they attend worship. Some people have a profound sense of sinfulness and a yearning for forgiveness. There will also be people for whom this is not a strong life theme.

Preaching is not therapy. Sermons are not counselling sessions. However, those participating in a therapeutic encounter and those listening to a sermon share many things in common. Each is hopeful of a different kind of future. There is some expectation that existential matters will be raised. Words will be used. The aim is the making of meaning.

In the sermon, the making of meaning occurs in the very specific context of a sacralised world. It may come, for example, through new ways of seeing God and God's action in the world, or renewed motivation to live the reality of the sovereignty of God and one's identity as a Christian.

Christian formation

Within a narrative epistemology, identity is the product and process of the construction of the personal narrative. As stated in Chapter One, there is therefore no assumption about a unified or singular human identity. Christian identity will be subject to change as it is explored and lived out through the personal narrative, impacted by the discourse of the religious community and negotiated within a network of relationships.

My own Christian journey included periods of belonging to quite pietistic and fundamentalist groups. Elements of belief systems of these groups were in tension with major aspects of the church community that nurtured me through childhood and my belief system at this time. However they appealed to some elements within my personal narrative: my desire to be a "good" Christian; my desire to be part of a network of relationships that supported my Christian journey. Eventually the contradictions between my own belief system and that of

37 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*. The Fourth Part, Baptism IV, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*,(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 360.

the groups with which I was involved led to a weakening of my association with those particular communities. I didn't notice the transition through the point to where all that remained was friendship with individuals that I had met within the communities.

As I reflect on those segments of my life it seems inappropriate to think about them as segments on a developmental journey. My experience fits a perspective that these are minor story-lines in my personal narrative. Elements of those story lines are still available to me should circumstances bring them to the surface. When a friend and I were talking about her father, recently deceased, we found we both occasionally had a longing for the simple faith he held. In the face of the events of early 2011, when the magnitude of destruction due to an earthquake in Japan eclipsed a series of tragic natural disasters Australia had experienced, I yearned for an interventionist God. It would be inappropriate to conclude that these yearnings, or my Christian journey during the period of my life described above, were somehow aberrant, a denial of my "true" Christian identity.

Michael White found it helpful in his teaching to draw out the distinction between structuralist notions of the self, and post-structuralist. One of the products of structuralist or modernist thinking that still pervades our society is a fixation with the "self." Concepts such as "self-actualisation" lead to consideration of the self as being a unitary whole, characterised by having an essential core. The things we say and the way we act are seen to be surface manifestations of this essence. Where inconsistencies exist between different manifestations, it is thought that by drilling down into the depths of the person, the true personhood/self/identity would be found. From this core understanding, structuralist or humanist counselling practices aim to correct difficulties with the person by interpreting what the surface manifestations of identity are indicating about the core of personhood.

Thick and rich descriptions

A narrative epistemology speaks of a thick/thin contrast rather than a surface/depth dichotomy. The notion of "thin and thick" or "thin and rich" descriptions of life was incorporated into White's work from the anthropologist

Clifford Geertz,[38] who in turn derived it from the writing of Gilbert Ryle.[39] A thin description is one which simplifies and summarises. A thick or rich description will go beyond the observable to the meaning that the one performing a social or speech action will attribute to it.[40]

Thin descriptions of Christian life, or thin conclusions about the self as a Christian, may well be satisfactory for an individual or group. This is particularly so in times of stability or where the social or cultural aspects of Christianity are central, rather than questions of faith or meaning. However, there may come a time when they become problematic. They lack the robustness needed to adapt to changed circumstances in their inability to embrace life's contingencies. Christian formation can be thought of as assisting in the "writing" of a thick and rich description of one's life as a Christian.

Through the personal narrative developing stronger and more vivid descriptions of one's relationship with God within the community of faith, one's identity as a Christian is strengthened. There comes a greater awareness of alternative stories to those which are problematic or lack meaning, and in the thickening or enriching of the alternative stories additional meaning and direction might be found, or hope generated. Someone with a post-modern worldview gives greater value to mystery and paradox than another whose perspective requires absolutes; a thick and rich Christian identity provides more resources to living with uncertainty.

The preacher has the potential to actively assist in the authoring of the personal narrative through attention to ways of promoting the making of meaning. The one listening to the sermon has already made a commitment to a search for shared meanings and understandings when they walk through the door of the worship space. This applies even to someone who has no faith background, as the act of entering a place of worship can be seen as consent to participation in the practice of spirituality or a search for meaning.

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38 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

39 Gilbert Ryle, *The Thinking of Thoughts. What Is 'Le Penseur' Doing?*, vol. 18, University Lectures (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1968).

40 This is in contrast to a psychoanalytic approach where the analyst attributes meaning to the utterances made.

For the preacher to commit also to the achievement of shared meaning as an initial and ongoing task opens the door to further exploration of meaning and the co-authoring of the personal narrative. When words like *relevance* and *relationship* are used in relation to preaching it is to this end that they are directed. A sermon that addresses or at least names the concerns that the listeners share or the predicaments they find themselves in, is likely to be thought relevant. An embodied relationship between preacher and listener does not exist for itself. To understand relationality as a reflection of the relational God that is proclaimed is fraught with issues surrounding power and its abuse. Rather, relationality is important in its role supporting the making of meaning and the sharing of meaning.

From the starting point of those things that are shared, the preacher can assist in the enriching of the story of one's life as a child of God and a member of the church community. By drawing attention to neglected areas of experience the preacher encourages those listening to wander into places where they might rediscover, articulate, or even see for the first time the intersection of God's story with their own. They might also discover previously unidentified knowledges and skills of their own lives that they bring to living out their baptismal journey.

Included in the concepts utilized in narrative practice that give ideas for thickening hopeful life descriptions are those of stories having parallel landscapes of action and meaning, Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development, and paying attention to temporal aspects of the reauthored story. Each of these elicits ways of thinking about the construction of sermons.

The dual landscapes

In chapter one I introduced the idea of stories having dual landscapes: a "landscape of action" and a "landscape of consciousness" or meaning. Jerome Bruner's development of this concept as it related to text provided the inspiration within narrative practice for the exploration of the way this metaphor could throw light on the way people interpret their lives. Michael White comments:

> I was quite drawn to this dual landscape conception of story structure on account of my interest in the narrative metaphor and in the activity of meaning-making. My interest in the narrative metaphor is founded on the assumption that people give meaning

> to their experiences of the events of life by taking them into frames of intelligibility and on the conclusion that it is the structure of narrative that proves the principle frame of intelligibility for acts of meaning-making in everyday life. This assumption is associated with a premise that it is in the trafficking of stories about our own and each others' lives that identity is constructed. The concepts of landscape of action and landscape of consciousness bring specificity to the understanding of people's participation in meaning-making within the context of narrative frames.[41]

In drawing together a series of events into a narrative, the landscape of action is described—the what, when, where, who and how of a story. The elements of the landscape of action are observable. Things happen. Decisions are made. We enter the landscape of consciousness as we interpret these events. Meaning is attributed, speculations are made, conclusions drawn. The beliefs, desires, purposes or goals of an individual (or group) will be reflected in the meaning derived from the experience. In return, the deliberations within the landscape of consciousness will impact the arrangement of the experience of events within the landscape of action.

To avoid confusion with technical terms used within other therapeutic modes, narrative practitioners will often refer to the "landscape of consciousness" as the "landscape of identity," and sometimes as the "landscape of meaning."

Before applying the dual landscape concept to preaching, I will more fully describe its application within counselling. People who are seeking assistance from a counsellor will usually give an account of the problem or circumstances of their lives which has driven them to seek assistance. It will normally begin with a description of the landscape of action as they describe a series of events which either illustrate the problem or to which they attribute the origin of the problem or circumstance. Very quickly they will enter a description of the landscape of identity or meaning, as they attribute motives or character to the various people within the story and begin to reflect on the meaning they have given to the events and relationships.

When a narrative practitioner is working therapeutically with an individual or group of people, the problematic story that is told is likely to be one which has

41 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York; London: W W Norton & Company, 2007), 80.

come to dominate the personal narrative. One of the ways to move beyond this problematic story is to find elements within either landscape which do not fit the dominant theme: events which seem to contradict what might be expected; motives or characteristics which do not fit the "thin" description being offered through the dominant story line. These elements—"unique outcomes" or "sparkling moments"—provide points of entry into alternative story lines. The narrative practitioner assists in re-authoring of the personal narrative through exploring these contradictory elements while replicating and enhancing the process of moving between the two landscapes.

The unique outcome is explored for the beliefs, commitments and motives that made this outcome possible; this questioning encourages those seeking assistance to see their own agency in the "unique" event. Questions can then be asked about other seemingly-isolated events demonstrating the same set of values or commitments. Thus a new landscape of action can be seen, as events which have not previously been understood as being related can be gathered together into a coherent sequence. This is an iterative process in which this new story line can then be examined for further insight into preferred ways of being, which open up further memories of events linked through the personal characteristics. Michael White gives a description of this as

> … what might be referred to as a "zig-zagging" process. We might be somewhere in [the person's] history talking about what particular events might reflect: *Well, on reviewing these events that took place then, what do they tell you about what was really important for your life?* So, in the referencing of one landscape to another, we have jumped from landscape of action to landscape of consciousness. And we can go the other way: *Are you aware of any other developments in your life that reflect this particular belief about what is important to you?* So we are now back in the landscape of action.[42]

In asking these questions the practitioner invites those seeking assistance to explore neglected areas of the personal narrative in both the landscape of action and the landscape of identity. The questions elicit discoveries regarding preferred modes of being, purposes and hopes. The landscape of action can be explored for events which reflect these preferred characteristics or motives or beliefs.

42 ———, *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995), 32.

By gathering such events together the new view of the landscape of consciousness becomes more robust, so that the preferred meanings identified may suggest a particular way of being and acting in the world. The renewed narrative, in which the description of the exception to the problematic way of acting or understanding is strengthened and thickened, provides the framework for a new way of knowing oneself and the world and therefore a new story to inhabit.

Dual landscapes within the sermon

Moving away from the counselling room and back to the pulpit, it can be seen that if a sermon is to impact on meaning-making, it will invite those listening to reflect in both landscapes. The well structured sermon will move between the landscape of action and the landscape of identity, evoking identity conclusions from the purposes, beliefs, values, hopes and dreams found within the response to events and stories, and suggesting new ways of acting or of viewing events and stories, in relation to the purposes, beliefs, values, hopes and dreams.

In the consulting room the landscapes of action and of meaning that are described will be derived from a personal story that the ones seeking assistance relate to the predicament that brings them through the door. This personalised starting point is obviously not available to the preacher. For preaching, the narrative that provides the landscapes for exploration is a portion of sacred text, part of the narrative of the community, the news of the day or perhaps a personal story that is understood to relate in a generic way to those listening.

I wrote the following sermon for a class in seminary, and present it here to illustrate the use of moving between the two landscapes within a story that is not specific to an individual. The assigned text for this sermon was the *Akedah*, from Genesis 22:1-18:

There are some Bible stories that should not be told to children. This one makes me squirm. I don't want to deal with a God that would command someone to kill their child. If I was Abraham I would be very angry with God, feeling that God had pushed me too far this time. The first time God called Abraham he was asked to cut himself off from his past, this time from his future, and for what …a

bunch of promises—words, just words. Can mere promises make up for that kind of emotional abuse?

I am deeply troubled by the idea that the outstanding example of faith is someone who was prepared to murder his child when ordered to by God. What difference would it have made to Christianity if, instead, the Father of faith was one who risked the wrath of God to protect his child from harm?

This story is so poignant just at this time, when we've read in the paper and seen news about the trial of a woman who tried to appease her own guilt by drowning her children. I hope that I would know to not listen to a voice if its message was contrary to what I know of God's will.

And yet the Genesis narrator is very careful to make sure we understand that it is the voice of God calling, not some demonic spirit, so I can't dismiss it by suggesting that God saved Abraham from the result of a psychotic episode, and neither is it dealing with it to claim that it's a twisted patriarchal story and has no place in today's church. So when all else fails—I need to squash my anger down —or is it to face my fear?—and return to the story.

[Can you imagine] an ancient desert, mountains in the distance, and a group of Hebrew children, sitting on the ground around their grandfather. He is going to tell them the story about *that* place …

After these things, God tested Abraham. The children look at each other and giggle. Such an uneven test: God knows what the result will be. *Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go….* The children are uncertain—offering a child in that way is forbidden, and sounds very scary, but the child is Isaac, God's laughter… Maybe its one of those jokes where God has the last laugh.

The preparation is made – he's taking wood, so it's to be a holocaust, a sacrifice of blood and fire. *After three days*… "after three days …"—the children can relax. They know this kind of story. After three days Joseph releases his brothers, after three days the whale spits Jonah out on a beach, after three days God makes a covenant, Esther initiates Israel's deliverance, God gives new life and raises up a people… everything will work out in the end.

Isaac takes on the donkey's work, carrying the wood on his back (maybe that's the joke), *And the two of them walked on together* The children echo the refrain. "*And the two of them walked on together*" and then so much detail—watch the altar being built, the dreadful binding, the hand raised (oh no, the fate of the people of Israel is hanging on a knife edge)… and the hand is stayed … and the ram provided. The substitute is given, the sacrifice is made, and the people of Israel will survive.

And Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide". Ah! Say the children. Now we know why …

The Lord will provide! Not, "God pushed me too far!" Not "Abraham was obedient!" *The Lord will provide*. Maybe this is the key to the story.

Perhaps Abraham wasn't acting in blind obedience to a God that would command murder. This naming is like a song of praise and seems to indicate a different relationship. Perhaps Abraham's obedience was that of a man whose entire experience of God was as loving and caring, so that he just expected that God would bring life even in this situation that seemed to lead only to death.

Perhaps this is why in the story of God's staying of Abraham's hand and in providing a substitute victim, Israel was confirmed again to trust in her totally mysterious and unfathomable God—who brings life even into the direst of situations.

So maybe there is still relevance in the story even when no angel of the Lord acts to stop the massacre of Auschwitz, no angel of the Lord diverts a plane being used to bring destruction, and no angel of the Lord calls out to prevent children from being drowned.

As God continually acts in love, as the unstoppable reign of God seeps into human existence, there will be life from death, hope when all seems hopeless: there has been, there will always be a third day

My meditation and research on the text had brought me to considering as central motifs for this sermon, the *third day* and the importance of the naming of the mountain. As I searched for a key to making these accessible, the idea came to me of introducing a group of children time-and-place-near to the Scriptural story.

There was no conscious awareness of needing to work with Bruner's dual landscapes, but I knew I wanted the listeners to learn more about ways that others had interpreted the text.

Lines 22–24 establish an intermediate landscape of action, between that of the contemporary listeners and the story line of the text. As the story unfolds (from line 25) the children's thoughts reveal a landscape of identity/meaning. Lines 25–29 intertwine this landscape with the landscape of action of the Scriptural story, laying the foundation for understanding some traditional meanings in the story. Lines 27 and 28, for example, highlight the scandalous nature of God's command to Abraham.

That it was *after three days* that the little group reached the mountain may have no significance for a person hearing this story. But the extrapolation by the children, which embraces other Hebrew stories of *the third day*, means the contemporary congregation become party to one way of understanding an element within this story. Further, connection to the Easter salvation event will be evoked in many of those listening without any overt naming of this as one of the *third day* events. This connection is made within their own personal landscape of identity/meaning.

The sermon was written in the USA during the high profile trial of a woman who had drowned her children during a psychotic episode (referred to in lines 12–14, and 56–57). In addition, while it was more than five months after 9/11 this pivotal event was still foregrounded in the community for which the sermon was written[1]. It seemed likely that each of these specific events may have been quite prominent in the landscape of action of most of those listening, and that they were events which raised questions about the trustworthiness of God.

Meanings which have been proposed for the Scriptural narrative provide the connection between the ancient story and the more recent stories. This is an example of the iterative interaction between the landscape of action and the landscape of identity. The connection of meaning potentially changes the way these stories are placed within the personal narrative and enables further

[1] Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1/3/2002

exploration of meaning from the stories of the near past, which may have relevance for the present and the future.

The aim of this sermon, and perhaps of all sermons, is for those listening to re-engage with their own experiences of life, and specifically to identify God's action in their life and the life of the community, in the light of the Scriptural text. It is hoped that gaps left in the sermon will be filled by personal reflection on their own lives in relation to the sermon.

Scaffolding through social interaction

Another metaphor to use to describe movement through the therapeutic encounter is that of *scaffolding.* In his later work, Michael White reviewed some of his techniques to encourage the further development of story lines through the lens of psychologist Len Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development."[2] White suggests that the therapeutic process erects scaffolding across the zone of proximal development. Providing a more detailed articulation of the reauthoring process than simply zigzagging between landscapes, it describes the supportive structure needed for the movement away from the limitations of the known and familiar toward what might be possible.

Within the counselling situation the "known and familiar" will often be a problematic description of life, including thin identity conclusions. The conversation is structured to open up possibilities for ways of thinking and being that are preferred to those being recycled in the lives of those seeking assistance. Deliberate movement away from the known and familiar will travel between the landscape of action and the landscape of meaning, exploring the meaning that is attributed to positive developments in the landscape of action.

Vygotsky viewed learning and development as a social and cultural act rather than an individual one. He went against contemporary thinking when he proposed that learning may lead development, rather than development being a prerequisite for learning. A knowledge management consultant explained the process thus:

> By organizing discrete elements of experience into groups, complex thinking creates a basis for later generalizations. But

2 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 263-90.

> conceptual thinking requires more than unification of things. Some elements of the concrete experience need to be singled out, *abstracted*, from the totality of experience where they are embedded. In genuine concept formation, it is equally important to unite and to separate. According to Vygotsky, these two processes of generalization and abstraction undergo simultaneous development in child's thinking, eventually leading to advanced conceptual thinking.[3]

Socio-cultural theory attributes the initiation and development of higher order thinking to social interaction. Those social encounters that lead to conceptual development are said to occur in the "zone of proximal development" which is the space between what a child could discover on their own, and what can be learned under adult guidance or in collaboration with peers.[4] The term *scaffolding* refers to strategic support given by the adult or peer which assists the child or learner to traverse the zone of proximal development.

Via the scaffolding of social interaction, a child can move from associating words with specific objects, people or events, to grasping concepts associated with those words. The process will go through steps of gathering similar things in collections, to abstracting single attributes and then using these to form chains of association. From these chains, higher abstraction towards concepts becomes possible. White suggests that Vygotsky's conclusions about learning and development are as relevant to adults as to children.[5]

He conceptualises the counselling processes as building scaffolding, with questions providing "planks" of a certain distance away from the known and familiar. The counsellor guides those seeking assistance to move from the known towards differing understandings, by using chains of association and a process that includes both generalisation and abstraction. The scaffolding planks need to be erected far enough from the known so that interest is maintained, but not so far that those seeking assistance fail to see the relevance. In this way "incremental

3 Ilkka Tuomi, "Vygotsky in a Teamroom: An Exploratory Study on Collective Concept Formation in Electronic Environments" (paper presented at the 31st Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Los Alamitos, CA, 1998), 69.

4 This reference to Vygotsky's work is drawn from a summary in White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 271-4, citing Len S Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, edited by Michael Cole et al (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 90.

5 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 275.

and progressive" movements through the zone of proximal development are supported.[6] Collaborative support has been shown in the educational context to be more productive than prescriptive direction.[7] The metaphor of scaffolding, as used in a counselling context, allows for gaps between the planks, and for choices to be made regarding direction. It is assumed that the facilitator will take a decentred position, so that the social interaction in the learning or counselling environment increases the potential options for action rather than being a means of control.

In his *Maps of Narrative Practice,* White gives the example of one possible "map" which uses these concepts to guide therapeutic conversations. He suggests categories for specific learning tasks as part of such conversations.

1. *Low-level distancing task:* questions of this category will encourage the attribution of meaning to events that have gone unnoticed.
2. *Medium-level distancing task:* these questions "bring into relationship specific events of their world in the development of chains of association that establish bonds and relationships between these events."[8]
3. *Medium-high-level distancing task:* questions which encourage reflection on these chains of association, so that discoveries may be made.
4. *High-level distancing task:* questions to enable the further abstraction of information from these discoveries regarding one's own life and identity, moving them away from the specific event.
5. *Very-high-level distancing task:* these questions "encourage the development of proposals for proceeding in life in ways that are in harmony with the newly developed concepts about life and identity,

6 Ibid.

7 Maria C M de Guerrero and Olga S Villamil, "Activating the ZPD: Mutual Scaffolding in L2 Peer Revision", *The Modern Language Journal,* 84, i, (2000), 51-68:55 , citing studies from 1992 – 1995.

8 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 276.

the formulation of predictions about the outcome of these proposed actions, and the planning for and initiation of such actions."[9]

Scaffolding for meaning

It is possible to apply these same categories of questioning to elements within a sermon. I will use the "third day" concept from the sermon earlier in the chapter as an example.

The children listening to the grandfather telling a story notice that the party approach the mountain on the third day. "*After three days* ... "After three days ..." the children can relax. They know this kind of story" (lines 31–32). With these words, the attention of the congregation is drawn to a small element of the story that would previously have gone unnoticed; this is an example of "low-level distancing." Attention is drawn to the seemingly insignificant.

"After three days Joseph releases his brothers, after three days the whale spits Jonah out on to a beach, after three days God makes a covenant, Esther initiates Israel's deliverance …" (lines 32–34). In this medium-level distancing exercise the association is made between this collection of Biblical stories via the theme of "after three days." The shift is then made from the landscape of action connection of the three days to a landscape of meaning connection, through salvific action which occurs on the third day within these stories: "… everything will work out in the end" (line 35).

Deliberately there is no mention of the Christian belief of Jesus' resurrection on the third day. The wording in the sermon invites the congregation to reflect on the motif of the third day and make the discovery for themselves—a medium-high-level distancing task. Without the scaffolding of the collection of stories, the appearance of "after three days" in the *Akedah* would not necessarily bring a heightened awareness of links to the resurrection story. It would most likely have been a gap too wide to leap.

By using the example of Abraham and the Israel of near-history, those listening are encouraged to take the notion of God's saving action and hope in what seems like hopeless situations and apply it within their own lives (lines 46–

9 Ibid.

60). It could be assumed that this high-level distancing task will be further supported through other interactions during the worship service—in liturgy, song, or prayer—perhaps moving the exploration into very-high-level distancing tasks.

There is nothing about the text that makes "after three days" the only or major motif to explore. Neither is the particular meaning attributed to that phrase a given. The specific events which occurred "after three days" are selected from the Biblical canon for inclusion in the sermon above because they are about God's saving grace. There are stories in scripture where disaster strikes after three days: rather than being necessarily a time when "everything works out" the Biblical motif of the third day is more accurately one of crisis or turning point. This process of selection towards making meaning is no less valid than when we choose elements of our own experiences to pay attention to in the construction of the personal narrative. In the personal narrative the selection is not so much a deliberate process, but the result of a myriad of contextual and relational features. In construction of the sermon it is equally likely that this range of features will also impact on the interpretive task. The preparation process for a sermon attempts to shape those influences so that proclamation is faithful to the calling of preacher.

An obvious difference between scaffolding movement in the sermon and a counselling session is the immediacy of both the "known and familiar" and of the concepts that the explorations lead towards. While there are some traditions that begin the crafting of a sermon from awareness of an issue of concern to the congregation, or within the framework of a series on a specific topic, the sermon used as an example in this chapter began with an assigned text. The point to which the sermon moves is also generic, rather than being derived from the specific longings of the individuals who are listening.

Those seeking assistance from a narrative practitioner bring a story, usually problem-saturated, from their own life and relationships. In being able to dialogue with those seeking assistance, the narrative practitioner has the privilege of access to accounts of events in their lives. The narrative process deliberately seeks to find alternative stories from within the personal narrative that speak of confidence and skill, to open a door to the preferred ways of being. The stories of

deficit diminish in the face of these alternative stories, which are explored across the dual landscapes.

The landscape of action is littered with actual events in the lives of those participating in the dialogue and the landscape of meaning with the significance attributed to these events, and the dreams, motives and beliefs of the ones telling the story. So the reauthoring draws on the places we have been, the things we have done and what we have encountered. The one preaching the sermon cannot access these events. However, the way the sermon is delivered can enhance the possibility that those listening will reflect on their own experience.

Sometimes a text will inevitably evoke certain contemporary images because of coincidence of themes and their emotional strength. In the example sermon, reference is made to an event which in all likelihood had a personal impact on those listening: the trial of a woman who had, during a psychotic attack, drowned her five children. In the weeks prior to the delivery of the sermon it had featured prominently in the news. It was likely that many would have recalled the story or their own reaction to it when hearing again the scandal of the *Akedah* story. Similarly, major events in the life of the world or nation will place an overlay on any reflection. Like the Babylonian exile for the writers of much of the Biblical material, the attacks on the World Trade Centre were foregrounded for those in the USA for a long time, providing a hermeneutical lens for every sermon.

Allusion to such events may create an entry point into the personal narrative. When existential themes and concepts are drawn from the juxtaposition of the text with contemporary events they become relevant to more individualised events or meanings. In naming, for example, "hope when all seems hopeless" (line 59) it may be assumed that for at least some of those listening, events which have conjured hopelessness will be part of their landscape of action. If connection with the personal narrative has been successfully made, the proclamation of hope may be heard in relation to specific individual moments.

Mind the gap / decentred position

It is not the words spoken by the preacher which are of greatest consequence, but the meanings generated by the ones listening. This consequence

of a narrative approach to preaching avoids the need for an appeal to a "common human experience" as the channel for its effectiveness. In order to facilitate the making of meaning, it is essential for the preacher to take a decentred position. Again I use the parallel example of the narrative practitioner.

Central to narrative practice is the acknowledgement of the broader context of both the one seeking assistance and the practitioner; a narrative epistemology places the making of meaning within a social and communal context. Additionally, narratives are seen as "not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well."[10] Narrative practice applies a Foucauldian critique to the idea of neutrality in the counselling room, acknowledging the imbalance of power between therapist and client. Catrina Brown explores knowledge and power in the consulting room and contrasts the "not-knowing" stance of some therapeutic modalities—where the client is considered the expert on content while the therapist is expert on process—with a *partial knowing*:

> Clients' stories within this not-knowing stance appear to escape the social processes that make knowledge and power inseparable. Seen somehow to be outside of the influence of power, these stories can be taken up as is, as self-legitimizing. Yet clients' stories are no more inherently outside power than therapists' stories. The formulation of knowledge and power within this approach to therapy results in a focus on the individual, rather than social context and an attempt to discover the real unencumbered self, rather than to pursue emancipatory social practices and epistemology that acknowledge or challenge social power.[11]

In response to this, aware of the complexity of the interaction between knowledge and power, the approach focuses on the knowledges of those seeking assistance, using their own words whenever possible, within the social context. Practitioners attempt to render the process transparent, asking those consulting them which story lines or developments they would be interested in exploring, and "deconstructing" the process with those seeking assistance. These methods are used to avoid inadvertently reinforcing oppressive stories or imposing the practitioners own agenda.

Michael White writes,

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10 Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 144.

11 Catrina Brown and Tod Augusta-Scott, *Narrative Therapy: Making Meaning, Making Lives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 9.

> [I]t is the therapist's task to assist people to render significant some of these neglected aspects of lived experience. Upon engaging in this task, it is not uncommon for therapists to take a leading role in this attribution of meaning. When this is the case, the therapist undertakes efforts to convince people of the worth of these aspects of lived experience and assumes primary authorship. This is hazardous, for it can be imposing and risks alienating people who seek consultation.

In a parallel manner, it is not the life and interpretations of the preacher that should be central to what happens within the church. What is important is the making of meaning by those who are listening to the sermon. Manipulative or persuasive techniques may bring people to a particular viewpoint, but this is neither ethical nor ultimately effective. Meanings which are imposed upon the personal narrative, rather than created from within the narrative, have limited impact on meaning-making. They may be effective for a period of time, or within a certain context, but because they do not arise out of the experience of the one listening they are unlikely to persist or adapt to the contingencies of life.

Life-changing generation of meaning is authored within the personal narrative. A decentred preaching position creates space for the lived experience, the personal stories, the individual interactions with God and God's people to be drawn upon in the re-authoring of the personal narrative. Those listening have the role of principal author in the narrative of their own identity and meaning. Therefore, despite the reality of being in front of the congregation with a privileged voice, the preacher will attempt to adopt a decentred position.

The preacher has the potential to be very influential; however, if they take seriously the nature of authorship, that influence will be expressed in the creation of a structure for those listening to build meaning, rather than imposing ideas or an agenda. Among the elements that characterise this approach to preaching are the use of open and invitational language, the use of metaphor, and the invoking of the imagination.

Decentred does not mean disinterested or detached. As one colleague—a gifted preacher—said, the task is "putting yourself out of the frame. To prepare a good sermon you have to have your own soul stripped bare and then present it in

such a way that no-one ever knows."[12] Nor does decentred mean without authority. The preacher has been given authority by the congregation or the wider church, and generally has had the opportunity for education in areas that will inform their preaching, such as biblical, theological and homiletical studies.

The narrative practitioner attempts to take a decentred position within the counselling setting to ensure that it is the one seeking assistance and their social world that is foregrounded. It is not the therapist's relationship to those seeking assistance that is of concern, but the web of family, community and societal relationships that form the world within which the clients live. Martin Payne contrasts this to the role of counsellor in some other therapeutic modalities. He quotes Harlene Anderson referring to the counsellor as the "hero that liberates" in a Rogerian context.[13] Payne continues:

> This unrelenting focus on the counsellor-client relationship puts the therapy room at the centre of the process of therapy, with the relationship between the person and the therapist comprising the crucial agent of change.
>
> This *aggrandizes* the therapist. I would argue that locating the context of therapy as the counselling room and identifying the relationship with the counsellor as the core of therapy marginalizes persons' relationships and living contexts outside the therapy room as important factors contributing to their discoveries and decisions. … Everyone except the counsellor is made external to the process.[14]

Counselling that clearly acknowledges the actual web of relationships and social position of a person will not only be more productive, but more ethical.

Moving back into the preaching arena, a decentred preaching position is one which acknowledges the power imbalance, foregrounds the experience and values of those listening and therefore creates room for the personal making of meaning. Both preacher and listener are partial knowers, each one aware of a selection of the stories competing for truth. When the preacher is clear about their own positioning and perspective, rather than denying a leadership role, they are acting from a decentred but influential place. Michael White commented that "a

12 James Winderlich, pers comm., 6/12/2008

13 Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (London ; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000), 171.

14 Ibid., 170.

well-formed narrative question can be highly evocative of alternative images of a person's identity."[15] Similarly, in a sermon, phrases or questions that arise out of the expressions of people's lives recalled by the one preaching may be quite influential when they resonate within the personal narrative of one listening. White's comment continued:

> These images often generate reverberations that reach down through a person's history, reverberations that touch on historical experiences, that set off resonances. Suddenly the person finds themself [thinking] of some of their experiences of the events of their life that line up with and that support the image that was evoked by the question. At times these are experiences of events of life that the person has never previously given voice to.[16]

In my introduction I referred to the role of the Holy Spirit in the efficacy of preaching, and in the act of developing the sermon.[17] I suggested that the editorial work of the Holy Spirit is sometimes less effective than her inspiration. Perhaps a helpful metaphor for the preacher is that of being an editor. The Holy Spirit needs a good editor. A good editor will be invisible. A good preacher will not get in the way of the Word being proclaimed. A good preacher will make space so that the Holy Spirit can play between the words, creating meaning in those who are listening.

15 Michael White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 101.

16 Ibid.

17 Page 4.

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CHAPTER THREE

METAPHOR AND THE IMAGINATION

...the preacher speaks in another language, a language not frontal but subtle,
a voice not assaulting but surprising,
speech not predictable but faithful in its daring.

Walter Brueggemann[1]

John Carey, emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford, attributes the richness of literature to the use of metaphor and simile. "As the indistinctiveness of the text increases, so the reader's imaginative effort has to intensify", he says.[2] Carey described this imaginative effort as the "unique gift" of the written art, which is the "personal ownership" of the poem or story. In this he is echoing Ricoeur, who argued for "a *linguistic* imagination which generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphoricity."[3] The aural art of the sermon also calls on the power of metaphor to evoke this unique imaginative gift. The "New Homiletic" of the final few decades of the 20th century found that sermons that "worked" were sermons that provided space for response (Lowry[4]), that evoked the imagination (Ricouer, Eslinger, Brueggemann[5]), and were sculpted like a piece of art (Rice, Smith, Long, Buttrick[6]).

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1 Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 141.

2 John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber, 2005), 224.

3 Richard Kearney, "The Creativity of Language (1981): An Interview with Paul Ricoeur," in *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004), 127.

4 For example, Eugene L Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

5 Paul Ricoeur and Mark I Wallace, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative & Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

6 Charles Lynvel Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
Christine M Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), particularly 148-9.
Thomas G Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).
David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminister/John Knox Press, 1994).

This study is concerned with how sermons can interact with the personal narrative to assist in the making of meaning. Early in this exploration of the application of a narrative epistemology to preaching I asserted that the making of meaning is a fundamental characteristic of the human being, and that the personal (or group) narrative is an appropriate metaphor for the location and framework of the making of meaning. I proposed that one way to conceptualise the contribution of sermons to the making of meaning is that the sermon assists the development within the personal narrative of a "thick and rich" description of one's relationship with God and the community of faith. Chapter Two spoke about meaning-making occurring in the gaps in the story-line, the gaps between the words. This chapter will focus on the metaphor, and the space that metaphor and images create. I will argue that the careful use of metaphorical language—metaphor, analogy, simile, extended images—creates space for the unleashing of the imagination. The word *imagination* is being used to encompass the meaning-making resources of the individual to discern as well as create connections.

Current exploration of cognitive processes and language suggests that metaphors are not merely parts of speech or literary devices, but play an active role in understanding. It may be that metaphors are the fundamental basis of language.

Older theories of metaphor considered "normal" words and phrases to have a fixed, literal, one-to-one correspondence with an object or action which exists independently of the one naming it. The metaphorical use of words was thought to be "deviant" usage. Classical explanations, at least as far back as Aristotle, understand metaphor as merely a substitute or comparison for something that could be said in literal words,[7] implying some kind of objective similarity.

Early last century the philologist Ernest Weekley had argued for the primacy of the metaphor:

> Every expression that we employ, apart from those that are connected with the most rudimentary objects and actions, is a metaphor, though the original meaning is dulled by constant use.

7 Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985), 24-26.

> Thus, in the above sentence, *expression* means what is "squeezed out," to *employ* is to "twine in" like a basket maker, to *connect* is to "weave together," *rudimentary* means "in the rough state," and an *object* is something "thrown in our way."[8]

However, the twentieth century explorations of metaphor by the logical positivists did not move far from the classical position: as in most post-enlightenment philosophical reflection, rational, logical thought and language use was elevated. Expressions were considered to have meaning only as far as they could be tested and verified, and there appears to be no reflection based on the relationship of words that had a consistent literal meaning to early metaphoric forms. Metaphors were not understood to function at a cognitive level, but as a means by which the expression in which metaphor is used gains unspecified emotional content.

More recent "incremental" theories of metaphor saw the metaphor as being greater than the sum of its parts, saying something that "can be expressed adequately in no other way" to "produce new and unique agents of meaning."[9] In *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Janet Soskice categorises types of incremental theories into intuitionist and formal. Intuitionist theory proposes that the metaphor transforms any literal meaning through an intuitive process. Soskice quotes Israel Scheffler's assertion that this proposal does nothing more than give a name to mystery, and does not advance our understanding of how metaphors work.[10] She groups together those incrementalist theories which do attempt to explain the mechanism by which metaphors work, as "formal theories". Of these, the one she considers "the most satisfactory contemporary philosophical account of metaphor" is that of Max Black. Black proposes that metaphors rely on the interaction of the context of a literal frame and the metaphor, which provides a focus to shift the meaning, as intended by the speaker and received by the one listening.[11] The metaphor provides a way to "filter" and "screen" aspects of the literal subject.

8 Ernest Weekley, *The Romance of Words* (London: Murray, 1912), 105.

9 Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 31.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 39,40. Soskice is primarily drawing on Max Black's chapter "Metaphor" in *Models and Metaphor: studies in language and philosophy,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 25-47.

Soskice's own conclusion is that the definition of metaphor can be no more precise than that it is "speaking about one thing or state of affairs in terms which are suggestive of another."[12] She suggests that a theory of metaphor will ideally pay attention not just to a speaker's intention, but also to a range of contextual issues, including "the beliefs held mutually by both hearer and speaker, and the patterns of inference the hearer employs in determining the speaker's meaning."[13] In this formulation she is building on the "interanimation" theory of I. A. Richards.

Richards' claims for the metaphor were oppositional to the logical positivism that dominated Western philosophy at the time he was writing. He proposed that the meaning and sense of words "are resultants which we arrive at only through the interplay of the interpretive possibilities of the whole utterance", including its context.[14] Rather than viewing metaphor as an aberration from the rational, which needed to be explained in terms of comparison with the literal, he reached the conclusion that it was foundational to thought itself.

> The traditional theory ... made metaphor seem to be a verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words, whereas fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.[15]

Metaphoric Frames

The work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson regarding metaphor and its place in language and cognitive function continues in the direction of Richards' conclusions. In *Metaphors We Live By* they offer supportive evidence that rather than metaphor being deviant language use, it may well be the foundation of language. They suggest that many words that now have precise and widely agreed-upon definitions were once metaphors and that the arenas within which these metaphors were derived continue to have a wide influence. Lakoff and

12 Ibid., 53.

13 Ibid., 44.

14 I A Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Mary Flexner Lectures on the Humanities # 3; Bryn Mawr College (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), 37, cited in Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*.

15 Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 94.

Johnson propose that our language is underpinned by a coherent system of metaphorical expressions that structure the way we view the world and interact with it. Rather than metaphors being incidental to language and thought, metaphors provide the framework for our conceptual system.[16]

In my introduction to the narrative epistemology being utilised in this study, I stated that the personal narrative has multiple strands, and that the experiences we pay closest attention to are those that reinforce the dominant strand(s) of the personal narrative. Parallel to this is the suggestion by Lakoff and Johnson that the systematic nature of metaphorical frames means that at any time some aspects of any concept are revealed and others hidden. For example, the metaphorical concept that "time is money" structures our understanding that time

> …is a valuable commodity. It is a limited resource that we use to accomplish our goals. … Thus we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered.[17]

Lakoff and Johnson point out that the quantification of time is a relatively recent phenomenon and is not culturally universal. Neither does the "time is money" metaphor fit all aspects of time.

> If you *spend your time* trying to do something and it doesn't work, you can't get your time back. There are no time banks. I can *give you a lot of time*, but you can't give me back the same time though you can *give me back the same amount of time.*[18]

Within the narrative metaphor, the personal narrative focuses the interpretation of experience. Certain events are ignored and others highlighted in terms of significance given to them. Lakoff and Johnson's theory suggests that metaphorical frames focus the interpretation of concepts, concealing some elements and highlighting others. They refer to this filtering process as the action of the "hidden hand," the unconscious conceptual system that organises our experience.

16 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6.

17 Ibid., 8.

18 Ibid., 13.

A useful example of the impact of this organisation is that of orientational metaphors. In polar-oppositional pairs, happy is *up*, sad is *down*; conscious is *up*, unconscious/asleep is *down*; having control or force is *up*, being subject to control or force is *down*; more is *up*, less is *down*; good is *up*, bad is *down*; rational is *up*, emotional is *down.* "You're in *high* spirits." "I *fell* into depression." "Wake *up*." "He *sank* into a coma." "I am *on top of* the situation." "He is *under* my control." "My income *rose* last year." "He is *under*age." "Things are looking *up*." "Things are at an all-time *low*." "The discussion *fell* to the emotional level, but I *raised* it back up to the rational plane."[19]

There is a coherence in the way that this and other metaphoric frames are applied. This coherence reflects culturally bound conventions that impact interpretation and the making of meaning. If more is *up*, and good is *up*, then by both formal logical analysis and also at an emotional inferential level, *more is good*. This has obvious implications for the way we think about sustainability and simple living, or healthy eating and generosity. If rational is *up* and good is *up*, then *rational is up*. Therefore rational styles of decision making and argumentation will be valued more highly than intuitive or emotional.

While the coherence of the metaphoric frames generally leads to a logical consistency, there are exceptions. Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate that where conflicts occur, within social sub-cultures specific values are given priority. So, for example, "Inflation is rising" and "The crime rate is going up" demonstrate the dominance of *more is up* over *good is up*.[20]

Lakoff and Johnson propose that the influence of metaphoric frames on the attribution of meaning remains long after the metaphors have been conventionalised.

> [O]nce established, extended metaphoric mappings become a permanent part of long-term memory and are automatically invoked when reasoning with concepts from the target domain. … [S]uch mappings are necessary in that abstract domains of

19 Ibid., 15-17. The polar oppositions and the examples given are all from Lakoff and Johnson, who refer to doctoral research by William Nagy (1974) "Figurative Patterns and Redundancy in the Lexicon." PhD dissertation, University of California at San Diego.

20 Ibid., 23.

> knowledge can be conceptualized only in terms of more concrete or experiential ones.[21]

This implies not only that the larger frames or domains are used for the production and understanding of common metaphoric expressions, but that they have a continuing role in the understanding of the concepts thus expressed.

Brian Bowdle and Dedre Gentner give a more nuanced understanding, extrapolating from research on how metaphors are cognitively processed that while the influence of the metaphoric frames may continue within the language as long as they are useful for comprehension, the "ability of any of these metaphors to invoke large-scale domain interactions may reduce as they become conventionalized."[22]

The description thus far could be understood as implying that metaphorical frames are somehow static, populated with words that we understand as having fixed meanings which are derived from these metaphorical frames. However research demonstrates that we use metaphors dynamically to organise our ideas. According to Bowdle and Gentner, "studies of scientific writing support the notion that far from being mere rhetorical flourishes, metaphors are often used to invent, organize, and illuminate theoretical constructs."[23] The metaphorical systems used in the various fields of inquiry reflect and form the dominant modes of thinking about the focus of the area of study. "For example, Gentner and Grudin (1985) found that the nature of mental metaphors used by psychologists has shifted over time from *animate-being* metaphors (e.g., *ego defences*) and *spatial* metaphors (e.g., *connections between ideas*) to *systems* metaphors (e.g., *attentional switchboards*), simultaneously reflecting and motivating the conceptual evolution of psychological models."[24] In the context of this study it is appropriate to add the *narrative* metaphors (e.g., *story-lines*) to their list of the metaphorical frames used within psychology shifting as they reflect changes in approach.

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21 Brian Bowdle and Dedre Gentner, "The Career of Metaphor," *Psychological Review* 112, no. 1 (2005): 212.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 193.

24 Ibid., citing D Gentner & J Grudin, "The evolution of mental metaphors in psychology: A 90-year retrospective", *American Psychologist, 40,* (1985):181-192.

From within a narrative epistemology I understand the metaphor of "metaphoric frames" to have an equivalence with the metaphor of "dominant story-lines." It may be that the narrative metaphor helps us better understand the interaction between conventionalized metaphors and metaphorical frames. Our personal narrative arises within the discourses of our communities of belonging. Within these discourses some of the frames within which common expressions are generated will be active, for example, that *love is like a journey.*

> "Look how far we've come," "It's been a long, bumpy road,"
> "We're at a crossroads," "We may have to go our separate ways,"
> "Our marriage is on the rocks," and "We're spinning our wheels."

There may well be alternative metaphorical frames which are used in generating meaning from our experiences, and whether specific frames are invoked by specific expressions or experiences will depend on their relationship to dominant story-lines within the personal or group narrative.

The hymns and songs of the church give ready illustration of the interaction between metaphorical frames and dominant story lines from different times and in different church sub-cultures. Viewing the topic of incarnation, for example, through references in hymns passed down from the early church and into the Middle-Ages, a story-line of the Christian life could be characterised as *Christian life brings transcendence*:

> *O love how deep, how broad, how high! It fills the heart with ecstasy that God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form for mortals' sake.*
> (*O amor quam ecstaticus,* ascribed to Thomas á Kempis, 1379-1471)

> *Of the Father's love begotten ere the world began to be, he is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see.*
> (Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, 348 —413)

Many hymns of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries reflect the metaphorical frame *Christian life is a journey through a valley of tears.* These examples of hymns about the incarnation, from within that framework, reveal an understanding of the incarnation and continuing presence of Christ as that which leads out of the travail of life toward eternal joy after this life is over.

> *My pathway home is shrouded in dark night, I see no dawn; thou art the light dispelling this world's gloom*;

(*Lead thou me on*, Alfred Ernest Richard Brauer 1866-1949, based on *Lead, kindly light* by JH Newman, 1832.)

What can these anxious cares avail thee, these never-ceasing moans and sighs? What can it help, if thou bewail thee o'er each dark moment as it flies? Thy cross and trials do but press the heavier for thy bitterness.
(*Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* Georg Neumark, 1621 – 1681).

Beloved all is well: though sorrow clouds our way, 'twill only make the joy more dear that ushers in the day.
(George Washington Doane, 1799-1859).

In the early part of the twentieth century, the cruelties of the world were replaced by a stronger sense of the unworthiness of the individual, for whom Christ would bring salvation and was the example of essential personhood. The metaphorical frame could perhaps be expressed as *Christian life is a journey from unworthiness to grace.*

You came unequalled, undeserved,
to be what man was meant to be;
(*My Lord, you wore no royal crown*, Christopher Idle, 1938)

Lord, who in your cross and passion hung beneath a darkened sky, yet whose thoughts were for your mother, and a thief condemned to die: May your grace and mercy rest on the helpless and distressed.
(*Lord, who left the highest heaven*, Timothy Dudley Smith, 1962)

The hymns written within my tradition in the past couple of decades reflect a shift to a different story-line: *Christian life is a journey with Christ's presence* where the incarnation is related to human life in its fullness, proleptically living the sovereignty of God while the earthly journey continues:

When Jesus Christ worked here on earth, he preached in his home town. Isaiah's hopes were now fulfilled, those claims of great renown. To bring good news to needy folk, to help the blind to see …deliverance is Christ's to give, for this to earth he came.
(Howard S Olson, © 1993)

Jesus, open our senses, help us see you today in the person beside us, as we work, as we play. While we love you and serve you, may it never be true: you were in this place – but we never knew.
(*You were in this place*, Robin Mann © 1987)

Like the woman of old, each day we go to the wellsprings of life to find Jesus there. Some days … it's too hard. … Some days our faith moves mountains.
(*Wellsprings*, Don Stewart © 1995)

Contemporary worship songs written from within a more Pentecostal tradition have a similar story-line and representation of meaning of the incarnation, with a greater emphasis on glory and blessing brought by the sovereignty of God.

> *My Jesus, My Savior, Lord, there is none like You; All of my days I want to praise the wonders of Your mighty love…. I sing for joy at the work of Your hands, forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand, nothing compares to the promise I have in You.*
> (*Shout to the Lord,* Darlene Zschech © 1990)

> *No other name like Jesus, no power can stand against you. When I'm poor, I know I'm rich for in the power of your name. All things are possible, all things are possible.*
> (*All things are possible,* Darlene Zschech © 1987)

If a sermon is to make connection with the personal narrative of those listening, it needs to be written with an awareness of the metaphoric frames or dominant story-lines that already exist within the individual and/or group narrative. This awareness will necessarily go hand in hand with clarity on the frames or organising story-lines that the preacher believes are congruent with the Christian story. The overarching framework for any sermon will always be the grace of God, for "when imagination is divorced from grace and truth, it is corruptible."[25]

The existing cognitive structures will either be useful resources or unhelpful blockages as those listening to a sermon find meaning for themselves in the Christian story. Either way these structures will have an influence and therefore they are an important part of the contextual analysis that feeds the development of a sermon. The next chapter will specifically explore the deliberate subverting or deconstruction of dominant story-lines which are seen to be antithetical to the Christian or liberated life.

Learning the metaphorical expressions of a specific community is part of the process of belonging. The use and understanding of metaphor is grounded in the broader beliefs, practices and intentions of those speaking and listening. Metaphoric frames are part of the cultural values we absorb as we participate in

25 Thomas H Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, Abingdon Preacher's Library (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 107.

the various discourse communities within which we live. They are therefore part of the complexity of the negotiation of our personal narrative with our social context.

Resurrecting Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson begin their work *Philosophy in the Flesh* with the assertion that cognitive science finds "that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical."[26] There are no purely literal terms for abstract concepts so the language for thinking and talking about abstract concepts is necessarily metaphorical. The language for thinking and talking about God and all things transcendental is necessarily metaphorical. We cannot speak of God in purely literal terms.

"What is a metaphor?" Richard Nisbet asks, continuing:

> Metaphor is a way of knowing—one of the oldest, most deeply embedded, even indispensable ways of knowing in the history of human consciousness. It is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious, flash of insight to some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us.[27]

The absolute otherness of God means metaphor is our only way of speaking of God. These metaphors are culturally bound, generated out of the discourse of the community: "the great variety of ways in which the sacred has been portrayed … are related to particular times and places, to the cultural symbols then available to human imagination."[28] All religious expressions are products of cultural-linguistic traditions, as people find ways to respond to their experience of the sacred. Initially using the language and symbols available within the culture, those expressions that survive become cultural-linguistic traditions in their own right with their own language and symbols, bringing their

26 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3.

27 Robert Nisbet, *Social Change and History; Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 4.

28 Karl E Peters, "Dancing with the Sacred: Dialogue with Karl Peters (*Dancing with the Sacred*: Excerpts)," *Zygon* 40, no. 3 (2005): 637.

own structuring to the way those who are immersed in the tradition view the world.

A significant feature of Christianity is our belief that a personal relationship with the absolute other exists, so while God is not necessarily understood as person, many of our common metaphors are anthropomorphic. God is *king, judge, Lord, husband, father*—and each of these is half of a relational pair with humanity—*king* and *subject, husband* and *wife.* Many of our metaphors are analogical statements: God is *light, love, truth.* Less common ones capture a particular aspect of God's nature in a metaphor that provides less fertile ground for exploring other aspects: *she bear, eagle, rock, thunder.*

Just as we have no literal language to speak of God, so we have no direct language to speak of that which Jesus referred to as the *kingdom* or *sovereignty* of God. Parables such as *the lost coin, the great feast, the sower, the day labourers* provide flashes of insight into that for which we have no words. Even where the elements concerned with Christianity are observable, for example, *the church,* metaphorical language expresses the deeper understandings. The church is something more than a collection of people (or a building) and this is acknowledged in metaphors such as that of *family,* emphasising the relational aspects, or *Body of Christ,* emphasising the formational and missional aspects.

The living metaphor creates room for the unleashing of the imagination, but not all metaphors live. Many of our conventional words were once metaphors, but their metaphoric breadth has died as their meanings have become fixed. Other metaphors have become "dulled by constant use."[29] "Thousands of years of using a Christian canon of metaphors has "worn [them] smooth, like an old marble staircase, through centuries of stately liturgical ascent until their original figurative potency was lost."[30]

Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle's "Career of Metaphor" hypothesis proposes an "evolutionary path" for the shift from analogous/metaphorical use of words to a conventionally fixed meaning. It is evident that this continuing

29 Weekley, *The Romance of Words*, 105.

30 Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

evolutionary path is a critical feature of our language. Metaphors become standardised in their understanding within the speech community.

This process is not problematic when it applies to observable phenomena—the *eye* of the storm—or even to concepts where a precise definition may lead to productive analysis, such as concepts within philosophical reflection. The literal fixing of metaphor within religious language creates difficulties, however. The transcendent is by definition not observable. So when our metaphors for transcendent beings or experiences become formalised, they no longer fulfil the function of opening the mind to the transcendent. When the metaphor of *Father*, referring to God, becomes literalised, God is no longer *somewhat like a Father,* but *God is Father,* with the rational conclusion that *God is male.* When the *call of the Holy Spirit* becomes defined as something which is necessarily affirmed by the larger community of the organisational church, any interior experience of the *call of the Holy Spirit* is minimised or rendered quite invisible.

These metaphors are therefore no longer available to the imaginative meaning-making processes of the individual, but remain as part of the defined framework that surrounds the imagination process. Similarly, those metaphors which have become dulled through constant use evoke not the myriad of possibilities from the broader world of the domain from which the metaphor is drawn, but evoke connections with previous usage. So *the Good Shepherd* will no longer evoke images of the nurturing action of an agricultural labourer, but will recall stained glass windows, the emotions stirred by occasions where specific hymns and psalms were used, the memories of times the metaphor was explored in a sermon or song, or perhaps the illustrations from a Children's Bible or Sunday School lesson. Familiarity may well mean there is no longer scandal or insight in phrases such as *bread of life,* or *lamb that was slain.*

Some metaphors, rather than fading or dying, have become too bright, so dominating the linguistic landscape that their true life cannot be seen. Many metaphors are so culturally bound that they struggle to reveal mystery or truth when transplanted to, for example, South-east Asia or central Australia. And it is possible to abuse the use of metaphors, evoking connections that are untrue.

Metaphors can be seen to have two potentially contradictory functions within religious language, and therefore sermons. The cultural-linguistic tradition built of metaphors is the vehicle for the community discourse that enables us to speak of transcendent things with some level of understanding between us. However, in a contradictory way, it is the lack of precision in understanding that gives the metaphor its power in releasing the human imagination towards further insight into the transcendent.

Metaphor and community

Held in tension with the openness that metaphors bring to a sermon is an awareness of the social-linguistic conventions of the discourse community that provide the context within which the personal narrative arises. As preachers we are aware that the sermon contributes to and shapes both the formal discourse of the community and the personal narratives of those who are part of the community. Part of contextualising preaching will be knowing the words and phrases to use, having a sense of what might be evoked for the specific community by the language we are using. This is not to determine what will be evoked, or to close down the possibilities that metaphors bring, but to avoid unhelpful miscommunication.

The group narrative of the assembled congregation will carry the imprint of the discourse of the denomination, its geographical and social placement, the congregational history, and the Scriptural knowledge generally possessed by the community. It will also carry the motivations, values and interests of the community.

> We spend our childhood mastering the imaginative conventions of the communities that raise us: what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Through speech and ritual, we are introduced to the politics of imagination, to the relative power of the various metaphors that guide the community's perception and behaviour. ... We assume that the world is the way we speak it, that reality matches the "metaphors we live by."[31]

31 Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, 119, the quote being the title of Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 publication.

We become part of the "club" by learning the language of the group. The faith of those of us who are raised within the church arises as we learn the linguistic conventions of the community of faith.

If part of the goal of our preaching is to assist people to find the intersection of their personal narrative with God's story, the metaphors we use in preaching need to invoke these shared understandings. James Nieman reflects that various elements of the practice of preaching make it possible to attend to the context of preaching—that preaching is an *occasional, situational, social* and *cultural* activity.[32]

Preaching happens *occasionally,* at a definite time, sometimes for a specific time-bound purpose (a funeral or wedding, for example), and while preaching will be proclaiming that which is timeless, it is also timely, speaking into a particular moment in time while having the capacity to lead to the creation of a new reality or timely encounter with the divine. That preaching occurs in a specific *situation* grounds preaching within the specificity of the discourse community. Knowing the linguistic conventions of the community to which we preach creates the capacity to build on these shared understandings to resurrect the dead metaphors, to subvert the unhelpful ones and to reshape the frames that produce personal narratives with values contrary to those of our faith.

The sermon being delivered into the *social* context implies that the person-in-community who is listening will interpret what they hear within both the personal and the group narrative frame and societal discourse. The *cultural* element of preaching means the context is the *symbolic* language and forms of the community. In addition to familiarity with the discourses of the communities into which they are preaching, the one preaching will also have access to the language and symbols of God's story as it is known through scripture and the traditions of the church.

> By deploying the local language at hand, preaching meets a context literally on its own cultural terms. … It can draw from those same terms as from a symbolic storehouse, calling forth language that appeals deeply to its hearers. Yet preaching is neither an innocent bystander nor hapless neophyte in this process.

32 James R Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching*, Elements of Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 9-12.

> Instead, it goes further to interact with those terms by drawing upon still others, the biblical and theological symbols available from the wealth of Christian tradition. … By being attuned to the symbolic, preaching therefore engages the context through words that work deeply and in ways few other cultural expressions can.[33]

When the context of preaching is occasion specific—a wedding or a community Anzac Day service, for example—the group gathered has no continuing identity. However, most preaching occurs within the local congregation. Luther writes, "[The Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." [34] As a discrete unit within the whole Christian church, the local congregation is called into being by the Spirit active in that place at that time. Preaching is directed towards the identity and mission of the congregation. That it is socially embedded has particular implications for the application of a narrative epistemology for preaching, which will be more fully examined in Chapter five.

In *Dancing with the Sacred* Karl Peters explicates the concept of process theology, that God is the creative process or creative event.[35] Quoting Gordon Kaufman, he speaks of the symbol *God* as pointing to "something working within the world," something immanent. Kaufman calls this immanent aspect of the sacred "serendipitous creativity."

> The name God, he writes, designates "that creativity and mystery, which undergirds our human existence in all its complexity and diversity."
>
> Serendipitous creativity points to a system, the parts of which work together in unpredictable ways to create such things as new life, new truth and new community.[36]

The church has a self-conscious understanding of itself as having an existence beyond the visible, understanding itself to be the embodiment of the

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33 Ibid., 12.

34 Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Section II "The Creed, explanation of the Third Article" in *Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 355.

35 Peters, "Dancing with the Sacred: Dialogue with Karl Peters (*Dancing with the Sacred*: Excerpts)", passim.

36 Ibid., 639, citing Gordon D Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 109.

presence of the Holy Spirit / serendipitous creativity. While the practice of the church has often emphasised stability and continuity, the work of the Holy Spirit is both sustaining and disturbing. "The Spirit blows where it wills … Creation involves continual disturbances in existing systems so that new stable states can emerge—new material elements, new forms of life, new developments in society, new patterns of thought."[37] Intriguingly, this is parallel to the tension suggested above held by metaphors, which both give a common language to a community, and open up the discourse to create space for new imaginings.

As the *body of Christ* the church accepts the task of living proleptically in the now-but-not-yet of the reign of God. For this unseen reality we have no way of naming but through metaphors, which will always fall short of that which we attempt to describe.

Metaphors and the individual

"Metaphor, like rhyme, is a way of connecting things contrary to reason. So is simile. So when writing is dense with metaphor and simile … the imagination has to keep fitting things together that rational thought would keep apart."[38] Metaphors open up what otherwise cannot easily be explored. The language used to talk about faith and the immanence or reign of God arises from the imagination of individuals within the community. When we speak of the role of the Holy Spirit in the writing and hearing of a sermon, could it be that we are referring to that spark of the imagination that allows us to grasp that which is beyond rational knowing?

Kierkegaard, in the persona of Johannes Climacus, wrote that metaphors "awaken the mind to an understanding."[39] He argued that in dealing with metaphorical language the "leap of inference" allowed the imagination of the reader to develop their own personal thoughts and beliefs in response to that which was read.[40] In the previous chapter the theory of transformation of James Loder was aligned with Lowry's analysis of the transformational impact of the

37 Ibid., 647.

38 Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* , 216.

39 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*, ed. Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 26.

40 Jamie Lorentzen, *Kierkegaard's Metaphors* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 11.

sermon and applied to the overall structure of the sermon and its impact on those listening. The claims made for the metaphor by those analysing language such as Kierkegaard, Carey, Lakoff and Johnson lead to similar conclusions for that much smaller element of the sermon, the metaphor or image.

Sermons not only contribute to the sustaining of group identity but also interact with the personal narrative of the individuals who are part of the group. Metaphors and images create space for us to wander through aspects of our experience, and bring insight and stellar shifts into our view of the ordinary. If the personal narrative provides the framework within which the wandering occurs, the imaginative responses evoked in those listening to and preaching a sermon assist in the authorial shaping of the personal narrative.

Each person has a unique position within the networks of relationships of the group, and a unique position in relation to the discourse(s) of the community, which entails a unique reception and interpretation of the sermon. As John Carey comments, regarding literature:

> How we read, and how we give meanings to the indistinctiveness of what we read, is affected by what we have read in the past. Our past reading becomes part of our imagination, and that is what we read with. Since every reader's record of reading is different, this means that every reader brings a new imagination to each book or poem.[41]

Applying the same thoughts to the arena of preaching, the record of past sermons, discussions and liturgies as well as the breadth of influences from secular sources is different for each person. So too are the experiences of their lives, the meaning given to these experiences, and the concerns they bring to the hearing of the sermon. Carey continues:

> It also means that every reader makes new connections between texts, and puts together, in the course of time, personal networks of association. This is another way in which what we read seems to be our creation. It seems to belong to us because we assemble our own literary canon, held together by preferences. [42]

The openness of metaphors leaves room for the imagination to play, within these *personal networks of association*—the framework of the socially

41 Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* , 242.

42 Ibid.

embedded personal narrative. In the previous chapter Vygotsky's work on the zone of proximal development was used to argue that a well structured sermon will leave room for the individual making of meaning. These gaps need to be large enough for individual meditation and meaning-making but sufficiently scaffolded that those listening can leap the gap.

Similar limitations apply to the effective use of metaphor and imagery. By definition metaphors require a gap between the conventional meaning of a word and their occasion-specific use. A metaphor too close to that to which it refers is no longer a metaphor, whether it is a poor choice of metaphor or image, or one that has become standardised so that "similarity has become identity; the *tension* that is so critical in metaphor has been lost."[43]

On the opposite pole, a metaphor which bears little relationship to that to which it refers is like a pair of electrodes too distant from each other to allow a spark to leap the space.[44] Gentner and Bowdle's research into metaphors found evidence that people prefer analogies "that share large, deep relational structures" derived from "the presence of a substantial relational match" and that "the same is true for metaphors."[45] Where strong structural analogies occur, metaphors create room for the creativity of the individual listening to make further inferences. Metaphors with weaker structural links between the base and target are less satisfying. I interpret "less satisfying" to imply that there is less room for the creative processes to explore the metaphor and derive new understandings.

Part of the preaching task is finding a balance between the language of tradition and fresh language that will open insights. Paul Scott Wilson writes, "The words of the Christian faith are gifts to us. They are treasures of which we are the stewards: We cannot let them die for they can be the route to true life."[46] He goes on to say that renewed language brings renewed faith, as understanding grows through playing with words and ideas

43 Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982), 41.

44 This image is that of Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 34.

45 Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle, "Metaphor as Structure Mapping," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Raymond W Gibbs (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 110.

46 Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching*, 41.

Imagining the future into existence

The narrative metaphor gives us a stronger image for connecting renewed faith to the imagination through the use of fresh language. Rather than being simply a matter of enhanced understanding, an open use of language creates space for the listener to grab hold of stirrings of the Spirit, new understandings, new perspectives, and incorporate them into the personal narrative. They may stir the recollection of forgotten story lines that carry the memories of encounters with the living God, assist the exploration of the relationship between the individual and God, or the individual and God's community. More than simply enhancing understanding, language that facilitates the continued authoring of the personal narrative has a direct impact on the identity of the individual.

Identity is the product of our associations of life as expressed in the personal narrative. Presence within a worshipping congregation may indicate that a preferred story-line within the narrative is one of *discipleship.* Richard Hopkins wrote, drawing on White and Epston's concept of restorying experience, "Our narratives are the means through which we imagine ourselves into the persons we become."[47] The thickening and enriching of the preferred story line strengthens our *Christian* identity and has a direct impact on the way we interact with the world. By interpreting and retelling our own story through the lens of God's action in the world, our understanding of ourselves as beloved children of a merciful God is strengthened within the personal narrative. Sally McFague tells us that the "root-metaphor of Christianity… is a mode of personal relationship, exemplified in the parables and with its chief exemplar Jesus himself, a sensitive relationship distinguished by trust in God's impossible way of love in contrast to the loveless ways of the world."[48]

This is an iterative process. Where the gracious presence of God in our lives is foregrounded within the personal narrative, it is more likely that glimpses of the divine at work will be noticed. Together with our identity, our way of interacting with the world shares the iterative process: to interpret one's actions as

47 Richard L Hopkins, *Narrative Schooling: Experiential Learning and the Transformation of American Education*, Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), xvii. citing Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W W Norton, 1990).

48 McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 108.

arising out of one's faith commitments is to thicken that story-line and increase the likelihood of choosing those preferred ways again.

The capacity of metaphorical language to make space for grasping and interpreting concepts is of particular import, as discipleship involves living in the tension between the reality we see and experience and the reality that is our sustaining hope and experienced at other than the rational level. Paul Ricoeur speaks of the human being as "tethered between freedom and nature, between the self-transcending powers of the imagination and the always limiting character of perspectival, fragmented experience."[49] We need to find a way to be in the world of our senses and experience while living in the altered reality of the now-but-not-yet reign of God.

Kathleen Fischer refers to the imagination as that which "allows us to 'see visions' and 'dream dreams,' it is a pentecostal power, enabling Christians to move forward in history… The imagination not only shows us a possible future, it evokes the energies needed to participate in the coming of that future."[50] The new age inaugurated by and glimpsed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth is not some fixed, historical ideology but is our participation in the good news—an openness to the presence of God and anticipation of the reign of God. In this openness there is no certainty. It is a work of the imagination. Preaching which teases the mind into active meaning-making will help create a community which is open to the new and surprising in God's action in the world and each other.

The exploration of the sermon through the lens of a narrative epistemology finds many parallels in Ricoeur's thought. Mark Wallace summarises:

> the metaphorical imagination is an ally for the understanding and articulation of the faith. In its essence, faith is a living out of the figures of hope unleashed in the imagination…
>
> [T]he power of the text to disclose new possibilities offers the reader an expanded view of the world and a deeper capacity for selfhood. … Ricoeur maintains that a variety of nonreligious and

49 As summarised by Mark I Wallace, "Introduction," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (1995), 3,4.

50 Kathleen R Fischer, *The Inner Rainbow: The Imagination in Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 24. Quoted in Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective*, 148.

> religious fictions (including the Bible) are revelatory—not in the sense that they are *deposits* of divinely inspired truths but because they faithful *enact* a productive clash, and sometimes a fusion, between their world and the world of the reader. Ricoeur understands *revelation* in performative, not propositional, terms: it is an event of new meaning between text and interpreter …[51]

In a paradoxical way, metaphors enable us to realise the transcendent because they are earthly grounded, just as our experience of the transcendent God is entirely through God's actions in the world and the incarnation in Jesus the Christ. In declaring that imagination combines feelings and thought in a creative performance, and that metaphor is an activity of the imagination and feelings, Ricoeur opens the discussion on the embodiment of metaphor. [52] Dan Stiver gives this summary:

> The picturing activity is such an embodied act that it includes in its projecting of a world the feelings, obviously giving depth to what one might take as an overly rational enterprise. In fact, it is doubtful that the understanding of a projected world is possible apart from the "feelingful" understanding. Ricoeur appeals here also to Heidegger's indications that "moods disclose our situatedness or being-in-the-world. Ricoeur speaks similarly in Freedom and Nature: "Affectivity is still a mode of thought in its widest sense. To feel is still to think, though feeling no longer represents objectivity, but rather reveals existence."[53]

The personal narrative is the vehicle for the reality we create that reflects our beliefs and our experience. While the social and cultural context is the discourse of the various communities to which we belong, our experience is embodied experience. Lakoff and Johnson's description of rationality dovetails neatly with this assertion.

> There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement. The evidence supports, instead, an evolutionary view, in which reason uses and grows out of bodily capacities.[54]

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51 Wallace, "Introduction," 8.

52 Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

53 Dan R Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 204.

54 Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, 17.

Our thinking is not somehow separate from our bodily, earthly existence, but incarnate in it. Transformational (or formational) moments are accompanied by emotion, which is necessarily embodied.[55] The personal narrative not only carries the events of our lives, but the stories of our relationships, our hopes and our commitments; elements of the personal narrative can often be located through the emotional content. What we know and understand, we know and interpret through our bodies.

> Contrary to the philosophical tradition that has seen the body and emotions as a threat and hindrance to knowing, contemporary epistemology is aware that our thinking is incarnate, that is, it is a bodily action, however it is finally explained in terms of a qualified dualism or holism. Apart from the body and the emotions functioning properly, thinking is hindered. It is still possible that emotions can carry us away, as Ricoeur points out, but that the alternative is not a dualism that stoically suppresses the emotions but a holism that attempts to work productively with them. As the existentialist tradition has often emphasized, sometimes we have the best insight when we are most passionate, not least.[56]

When a narrative practitioner is working with an individual or group, to assist distancing from the problematic, questions are asked about events that seem to be patterned in ways other than the dominant problematic ways. Starting from the known and familiar, the questions will be about aspects of the event and the emotional landscape around it that have probably gone unnoticed. Questions asked within the landscape of identity aim to facilitate the rich development of identity conclusions.

The dominant discourses of our communities mean that generally people are likely to respond initially to questions about identity conclusions with what White refers to as *internal state understandings*, structuralist categories of "unconscious motives, instincts, needs, desires, drives, dispositions, personality traits, personal properties (like strengths and resources)".[57] White suggests these

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55 This returns us to the work of Susan Aylwin on "enactive imagery", referred to in Chapter One (page 31). She comments, "Strong emotions are often found in a complex conjunction of two other components of enactive imagery: transitive action, and the future towards which this action is directed." Susan Aylwin, *Structure in Thought and Feeling* (London; New York: Methuen, 1985), 130.

56 Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*, 203.

57 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York; London: W W Norton & Co., 2007), 101.

are a "poor basis for knowledge of how to proceed in life,"[58] being relatively fixed and open to normalising judgement. Further questioning assists people to begin to recognise *intentional state understandings*, non-structuralist identity characteristics like "intentions and purposes, values and beliefs, hopes, dreams and visions, commitments to ways of living, and so on."[59]

From this enriched description of the things that are accorded value by those being questioned, further questions are asked to move towards preferred ways of being, "questions … that encourage people to generate new proposals for action, accounts of the circumstances likely to be favourable to these proposals for action, and predictions about the outcome of these proposals."[60]

The preacher will immediately recognise the non-structuralist categories of identity as being those in which sermons traffic. The preacher does not have the luxury of questioning an individual or group in a way that elicits information about the landscape of identity within their narrative. Through the use of metaphorical language, however, she/he can invite those listening to reflect on what values important to them the text or other shared speech evokes. While the manipulation of emotions is to be stringently avoided, the indeterminateness of fresh metaphors and the memory links of decaying ones have the capacity to engage the emotional being to assist in accessing neglected parts of the personal narrative.

In closing this chapter I wish to illustrate the use of some of the concepts presented. Like the sermon analysed in the previous chapter, these fragments are from a sermon written for a seminary class.[61] The text for the sermon was the Psalm for Ascension Day, Psalm 47. In attempting to be respectful of the genre of the assigned text, I experimented with a sermon form that attempted to bypass any narrowly rational or cognitive view and sought an expressive genre that I hoped would evoke something of the gospel mystery of the ascension.

58 ———, "Workshop Notes" (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 2005), 8.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 8.

61 Sermon for Preaching Precept Group, Wartburg Theological Seminary, 2/5/2002

As a child, when I saw a gap in the clouds tipped at the edges with iridescence and golden beams of sunshine streaming down to the earth, I knew I was seeing the glory of God. God was in heaven so all would be right with the world. I could have sung our Psalm for today, celebrating the once and future sovereign of the now-but-not-yet kingdom enthroned in glory above. But today, Ascension Day, is particularly a time to remember that the exalted one is also the immanent one, the one that is in loving relationship with creation, the one that dances haloes around the moon on a frosty night and blows with wild passion through the hearts of human beings, the one who is companion in our joys and sufferings, who understands the agonies and ecstasies of human existence.

…

Sometimes the Holy Spirit seems to blow a crack in our world through which I catch a glimpse of the kingdom, where justice and peace are realities, where all are included. I have seen the breath of God as fifty thousand people dressed in the black, red and gold of the Australian aboriginal flag walked across the bridge to symbolize reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous, bridging the gap between cultures. Saying, this is my sister, this is my brother.

Surely it was blowing among the volunteers from peaceful parts of the world who are walking the streets of Bethlehem, placing themselves as living shields of international interest between Palestinians and Israeli troops. Raise a joyful shout to God!

I think I've seen the outposts of God's realm in those little white churches with spires reaching to heaven, built by our stern forebears whose photographs look down from the living room walls. I see the heart of God in the strange collections of people that gather there, as the circle of love enfolds the couple that has lost an unborn child, or opens to make room for a foster child with pierced nose and bare brown feet, welcoming her as one of the family.

And what could have motivated two young brothers to come to America from Germany and found this community? Were they emissaries for the realm, bearing fruit to a future reign they already experience? What is it that motivates a professor to email a failing student as soon as she's marked the paper that will give him the passing grade? What impels one student to work with another,

reading her paper, asking questions, offering suggestions, shaping, supporting … When I see, I give God praise!

…

Yes, Jesus no longer walks the earth, but then whose is the face that I see in John, who has retired to the island where he spends his days contemplating and sharing God's bounty of fish and absolution? And who looks out through Kathryn's eyes? Ordained as a Lutheran pastor but now living in Australia, she is not permitted to preside or preach, yet radiates God's wisdom and grace because the loveliness of God cannot be contained.

Whose face am I seeing when the medical team jumps into action to pump the stomach of the one who has O/D'd for the third time in as many months? Where is God when the woman in bikie gear sits down with the women displaying themselves for sale, and offers them a new way of life and a path from their existence of bondage? Here is surely the presence of God, and I give God praise.

Today I look around and see faces of those in whom God lives and moves and has God's being, some of the faces of this community gifted to each other for mutual support, challenge, nurture. God with us, God between us, God over, under, around … I have seen the face of God, and I give God praise!

In the story of the Ascension the one perfect rainbow disappeared behind a cloud, but left behind a multitude of prisms, each refracting the spectrum of God's love. So why do we stand, looking at the sky? We have a gospel to proclaim!

The metaphoric frame *heaven is up* is reinforced strongly in the movement of the Ascension reading from Acts 2:9, and the sermon seeks to counter the accompanying image of the ascended Jesus as somehow distant and unreachable. At line 6 the standard Ascension message of the immanent Christ being exalted is turned around, so that while the message is being affirmed the relative weight shifts back to a sense of continuing incarnational presence. A similar twist to a familiar image occurs from line 29, where the picture-postcard little white churches of the mid-west US landscape are tied not to rainbows and Helen Steiner Rice verses, but to stern Norwegians and "strange collections of people." Through juxtaposing familiar images in unexpected ways I hoped to subvert or restore hidden aspects of those images.

Certain phrases seek to provide points of entry to the familiar—frost haloes (line 7) and failing grades (30–33)—and others contextualise in a more distant way, for example, the reference to the seminary founders (28–30). The final phrase (51) attempts to apply the angels' message to the disciples to the calling of those in the preaching class, being more specific than the call to discipleship of the image in the preceding paragraph (49,50).

In picking examples that refer to inclusivity (17, 26) and justice (16, 18–20) those listening are invited to affirm these shared commitments, with the hope that they lead to expression of these commitments as people living in the realm of God. The intention of the overall shape of the sermon was not to give a string of illustrations, but that the collection of vignettes creates an impact that was, itself, the illustration.

No sermon is complete in itself, but relies on the context of the worship service and on being one of many. This particular one could be critiqued that its emphasis on Christ-glimpses neglects a more Irenean theology of a specifically enfleshed Christ. It is also true that the chosen images of an immanent Christ are primarily positive, losing the moment to open the possibility of God acting in surprising ways. Just as context and continuity mean one particular sermon is just a few pixels on the canvas of a description of God and God's action, so the openness brought to preaching by attention to metaphor, image and spaciousness in the story-line is not the openness of gaping holes, but of loosely woven threads.

In the preceding pages it has been asserted that metaphor and imagery give us a way to speak of things for which we have no literal words, that they are culturally-bound, generated out of the discourse of the community, and that they may operate like the gaps in a story-line, their indeterminacy allowing the imagination to create meaning. They are both source and product of the imagination. Because metaphors evolve and decay, it is important to search for fresh images and metaphors if the creative power is to be realised.

Christian faith is lived in the tension of earthly reality and an unseen reality which we can only know through butterfly kisses of the divine. However, our commitment to living in that unseen reality can provide the stepping stones to actions we make as if we could touch it, and thereby we find our identity as people of the new reality.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DECONSTRUCTION

Language is transparent indeed but what can be seen through it is invisible.

Vojislav Karanovíc[1]

Included among the first of the 537,000 results on Google for the search "deconstruction + definition" is the *Deconstruction* reference in Encyclopaedia Britannica, which acknowledges:

> In polemical discussions about intellectual trends of the late 20th century, *deconstruction* was sometimes used pejoratively to suggest nihilism and frivolous skepticism. In popular usage the term has come to mean a critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought.[2]

Despite the breadth of meanings now evoked by the word *deconstruction,* it was coined for a precise, but complex, approach to the analysis of text. Building on Heidegger's philosophical work, Derrida used the word to refer to an exploration of the contradictions and tensions between pairs of words or concepts that are generally understood to be in opposition to each other within a hierarchal structure. In his analysis, the privileged term of the binary pair relies on the minimisation of the other for its identity. Moreover, opposition has no independent truth but is produced or constructed by the text itself. The deconstructive exploration of an opposition particularly focusses on the figurative or performative aspects of the text. One outcome of deconstructive readings is that the text (or other cultural artefact) offers implicit critique of the essentialist notions that might be used to analyse them.

Michael White's reading of Derrida and others influenced by his work was the primary influence in the development of three procedures within narrative practice. The first is searching for the "absent but implicit" in conversations. The other two are aspects of being curious about the taken-for-granted aspects of our lives and the things we do, with a view to exploring the truth claims inherent in these

1 Vojislav Karanovic, "By the Window." Trans: Zoran Paunovic. In *Literature Live*: Festival of the Croatian Writers Society, 2006.

2 "Deconstruction." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/155306/deconstruction, accessed 1/12/2009.

familiar practices: conversation towards attributing significance to the ordinary, and conversation aimed at disrupting unhelpful dominant discourse.

Rather than an exploration of the concept of deconstruction in philosophy or a close study of the deconstructive techniques of textual analysis, in this chapter I wish to explore how these three processes of narrative practice may be applicable to the crafting of the sermon. These practices seek to read between the lines of the expressions of the personal narrative that emerge within the therapeutic context, revealing meanings and values not previously articulated, and initiating or supporting the reauthoring of the narrative.

The Absent but Implicit

Derrida's analysis pointed out that meaning was derived by finding difference between what was being said or written and the other elements (words, phrases, sentences) of the context. In the therapeutic context, this idea has implications about the preconditions for people's negative expressions regarding their lives. Even though it does not appear in the spoken words that form the linguistic context of a therapeutic encounter, if someone speaks of feeling *hopeless*, for example, there is the implication within the words themselves that this person knows and values *hope.* The condition of *loneliness* is based on knowing something else—perhaps companionship or intimacy. These other experiences that illuminate the undesired state of being are referred to by White as the "absent but implicit."[3]

> For example, to express despair, one must distinguish this despair from another experience that is not—say, for instance, from an experience in life that is defined as an expression of hope. For one to express pain, the experiences that give rise to this must be distinguished from another experience, such as one that is read as a sign of what is given value to in life or is representative of what might be held precious. Thus, pain might be understood to be a testimony to what a person has held precious and has been violated, and ongoing distress might be understood to be a tribute to a person's success in maintaining a relationship with what he or she gives value to despite the forces that discourage this.[4]

3 Maggie Carey, Sarah Walther, and Shona Russell, "The Absent but Implicit: A Map to Support Therapeutic Enquiry," *Family Process* 48, no. 3 (2009): 310.

4 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York ; London: W W Norton & Co., 2007), 210.

Drawing on this idea, White writes of "listen[ing] for the signs of what the person has continued to give value to in life despite all that they have been through … Even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to try to protect and to preserve what they give value to."[5] He reflects that to acknowledge these things provides the foundation for conversations which can lead to a reinvigorating of a sense of identity and an ability to move into a future that embraces that which is held precious.[6]

We have probably all heard the identification of the absent but implicit in sermons. It can be found at the heart of classic "proofs" of the existence of God, and of many modern evangelical approaches.

> Augustine wrote, in the first pages of the *Confessions,*
>
> you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you. ... What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth? Does this then mean, O Lord my God, that there is in me something fit to contain you?[7]
>
> A thousand years later Blaise Pascal mused,
>
> What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.[8]

The *God-shaped hole* became the twentieth century short-hand for Pascal's discussion of *the infinite abyss*, in sermons and atheistic critiques, and in the titles of songs and novels. Its use alerts us to one of the difficulties with any therapeutic or sermonic tool: when personal experience is universalised, like a too-often used metaphor it may thereby lose its power to speak to the individual. The art of using

5 ———, "Working with People Who Are Suffering the Consequences of Multiple Trauma: A Narrative Perspective," *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 1(2004): 47.

6 Ibid.

7 Augustine, *Confessions [of] Saint Augustine, Translated with an Introduction by R S Pine-Coffin*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 27.

8 Blaise Pascal, "Pascal's Pensées." (New York: Dutton, 1958), http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/pg/1/8/2/6/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm. VII:425

the absent but implicit in the sermon is that it arises not from a generalised understanding of the human condition, but from listening to the hearts of the congregation.

In the therapeutic context "listening doubly"[9] for the yearnings that are behind negative expressions creates the opportunity to ask questions which help the one(s) telling the story to recall alternative story lines that embrace and express the unstated but implicit values. What is it that keeps longing alive? How do we maintain hope?

> In drawing out the implicit in this way, the therapist is not endeavouring to reduce the intensity of people's expression of frustration or pain, to shy away from these experiences, or to substitute other less vexing experiences for them. Rather, the therapist is being consistent with the assumption that life is multistoried and with the intention of reproducing the tradition of acknowledgement that promotes rich story development.[10]

The generalised "map" for therapeutically working with the absent but implicit begins with discerning some alternative response or action that hovers outside the problematic story, naming it, searching for the knowledge or skills expressed in the action, then moving into looking at the intentions and purposes behind the action and thereby finding what it is that is being given value to. The social and relational history of the value(s) can then be explored. Can the client recall experiences in their life that would have brought familiarity with that which is being valued? Is there a story about a time that confirmed this as a desirable experience?[11] Drawing together the threads of the personal narrative that connect with this value over time creates a foundation from which to muse about its place into the future.

There are many ways to tell a story. The retellings by different characters in the story or from a different perspective will bring fresh insights and new ways of looking at the same material. However, reauthoring a personal narrative is more than a telling and retelling of a story: it is an active search for those hidden storylines within the personal narrative that reflect the preferred identity and way of being.

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9 Michael White, "Workshop Notes" (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 2005), 18.

10 Ibid., 213.

11 ———, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 45.

Perhaps this concept provides a key to that elusive characteristic of a good sermon: relevance. A preacher that speaks to the heart is one that in the course of day-to-day interactions and pastoral caring is able to listen to the yearnings of the people and draw on the unstated but implicit values when addressing concerns.

Writing about crafting sermons to assist transformational change, Barbara Lundblad comments,

> As we look around the landscape of our country and the larger world, we need to acknowledge that many, including ourselves, are scrambling to secure a place, to shore up the shifting sands... If we listen carefully to the words and emotions behind the words, we hear a great deal of fear.[12]

Dismissing denial of conflict or controversy as a legitimate path for the preacher, Lundblad continues, "if we do succeed in avoiding all conflict and controversy, the fears won't go away."[13] She calls on preachers to name the fear as part of preaching for transformation.[14]

In the sermon with which she illustrates writing about grace, "Grace for the Ungraceful", Lundblad shares experiences from her adolescence marked by the sense of alienation or estrangement. Moving outward from her own experience she identifies separation as common to human existence, "a sense of being cut off from the very source of life". The sermon continues:

> At the heart of [Reformation Sunday] is the promise of an end to our separation: it is the good news of reunion with God. This reunion is a word of grace for the ungraceful.[15]

This longing for something different from alienation or estrangement, captured by Lundblad in the personal story from her youth and applied more generally in a way that most of those listening would have felt, can surely only exist if union is an inherent, even if unstated, value.

12 Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 15.

13 Ibid., 17.

14 Ibid., 18-21.

15 Ibid., 41.

Attributing significance to the ordinary

Lundblad's sentences provide a neat segue into the concept of *attributing significance to the ordinary*. The sermon had opened with recollections of awkward and ungraceful moments of childhood and adolescence, and closed with images of God's acceptance as a (graceful) invitation to dance. When even the awkwardness of our teenage years can be brought to our attention as something that can speak of God's grace, that which is ordinary acquires new meaning.

David B Allison stated in the introduction to his translation of Derrida's *Speech and Phenomenon* that deconstruction "signifies a project of critical thought whose task is to locate and 'take apart' those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought."[16] In an extension of this idea, narrative practice seeks to examine assertions or assumptions not of foundational philosophical ideas but of the everyday notions we live by. These will be revealed in the account being given by those seeking assistance. The deconstructive process used is to raise questions aimed to "subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices" [17] that may be hiding ways of moving towards the preferred way of being.

Naturalistic accounts, for example, may render invisible the social and relational history of potentially important developments in the life of a person. In a very touching account of a series of counselling sessions, White tells how "Thomas" identifies *acknowledgement* as a key to his acceptance of the counselling sessions that were imposed on him in return for his access to accommodation.

> I asked Thomas why he thought he was drawn to this acknowledgement. "Surely you would know! Surely it's something that is only human. Don't you know that it's only human to long for acknowledgement?" replied Thomas. I said that I wasn't sure that I did know this, and I asked if he would care to expand on this understanding.[18]

As the conversation unfolds over a number of sessions, rather than dismissing his response to *acknowledgement* as being of little interest, Thomas is encouraged to

16 David B. Allison, "Introduction" in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), xxxii, n.1.

17 David Epston and Michael White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1992), 121.

18 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 142.

explore it as a chosen value that was developed through significant relationships in the past.

> In the course of this, Thomas became more convinced that the source of his familiarity with acknowledgement was to be found in his relationship with his mother, and he began to develop a much stronger sense of their mutual contributions to each other's lives and to each other's sense of identity. This had a profoundly positive effect on Thomas's conclusions about his own worth.[19]

In this example Thomas explicitly named the positive value, but had not noticed it as anything of significance for him, personally. Through questioning, opportunity was created to explore the naturalistic account of valuing acknowledgement. Opening up the story provided an avenue to thicken and enrich this strand of the personal narrative. *Acknowledgement* was therefore pivotal in the reauthoring of Thomas's personal narrative to embrace his values and their expression in his preferred way of being or identity.

How might this concept be used in preaching to enrich the personal or group narrative? I have firsthand experience of hearing in the words of a Sunday sermon a reflection on a conversation I participated in during the week, and finding life breathed into words that I spoke without thought. In that experience I have felt both personal acknowledgement and a sense of surprise in discovering a connection between words I had said, and values important to me. Congregational members who participate in "round table" conversations that contribute to the shaping of sermons[20] or have had social or personal conversations with the preacher during the week may have shared this experience. However, it is highly unlikely that this privilege is a universal one.

Of broader reach is the careful use of language so that the ordinary experiences of those listening might acquire new significance. Some preachers have an ear for hearing words more fully than most, and are able to use these words and phrases to enliven them for others. In this they become "a shearsman of sorts."

19 Ibid., 161.

20 Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said to him, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar,
Of things exactly as they are."

Wallace Stevens,
from "The Man with the Blue Guitar"[21]

A lived life is sacralised when considered to be a *baptismal journey*. A person who hears themselves named as ____, *loved child of God* might have reason for a sharp intake of breath. Playing with the word *at-one-ment* opens it for meaning.[22] The incarnation lifts up the worth of humanity. Everyday kindnesses can be named as a counter-cultural act. Everyday rituals—like giving thanks before a meal—can be moved to something more thoughtful through their description as, for example, being mindful of God's provisioning; this in itself opens eyes to seeing God active in one's everyday life.

Disruption of dominant discourse

The third deconstructive process of narrative therapy—exploring the truth claims of the discourse surrounding taken-for-granted ideas—is one that is closer to a broad community impression of what "deconstruction" means.

Every personal or group narrative exists in the context of the discourse of the society and culture. As Riet Bons-Storm says, "Discourse is never simply language; it is always linked with concrete, social, cultural, historical realities."[23] The problems that bring individuals or groups to seek assistance from a counsellor would not have

21 Wallace Stevens, *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems* (New York & London: Knopf, 1937).

22 As per Charles Birch, *On Purpose* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1990), xvi.

23 Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 134.

control over their lives without beliefs, ideas and principles that support them. These will generally be taken-for-granted societal or family norms. To explore the history and influence of these conceptions will be an important part of separating from the problem.

Alcoholism, for example, has often been regarded as an individual failing, and research regarding its genetic and developmental aetiology reinforces this understanding. In Australian society the dominant discourse paints an oppositional picture regarding alcohol use to that of the responsible use promoted by parents, public health campaigns and school drug programs. Stories of behaviour under the influence of alcohol are considered funny. Mateship demands drinking together. Alcohol is considered essential to relaxation. If someone were trying to escape from the influence of alcohol, this societal discourse, within which the individual's use of alcohol is nested, will be unhelpful. The broader discourse works against the individual's desire to escape from the impact of alcohol in their life. To ask questions about the discourses of their family, social group or wider society, regarding alcohol, is to open up the taken-for-granted and consequently hidden ideas, and thereby reveal them.

Alice Morgan speaks of the narrative practitioner's interest in "discovering, acknowledging, and 'taking apart' (deconstructing) the beliefs, attitudes and practices of the broader culture that are serving to assist the problem and the problem story."[24] When being consulted about a problem with alcohol, a narrative practitioner will ask questions about the ideas and beliefs held regarding alcohol and explore the history of these in the life of the people seeking assistance. Questions will be asked regarding the truth-claims of these ideas. Through this process—generally the only one to be referred to as *deconstruction* within the field of narrative practice—clarity is gained about how the stories regarding alcohol have been constructed, the ideas that have dominated those stories and which alternatives are rendered invisible in the telling. Deconstructive questions will challenge the credentials of oppressive ideas and societal forces and thereby disempower them. Through the process individuals or groups may discover ways to resist being shaped by the unhelpful discourses.

24 Alice Morgan, *What Is Narrative Therapy?: An Easy-to-Read Introduction* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 45.

Like Foucault's *criticism*, deconstruction in narrative work is neither reductionist, nor about making judgements about the correctness or soundness of a particular discourse or a specific social construction. Foucault made clear,

> critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest…Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. [25]

It is, rather, an appreciation or opening up of complexity, so there is enhanced understanding of the range of options for ways to live and be. The constructions that inform a reauthored personal narrative are as much cultural derivations as the dominant ones being challenged. They have their own history. They are being chosen not because they are somehow independent of social and cultural forces, but because they fit the preferred way of being. Deconstructive questions relate to the values and identity of those seeking assistance, to tease out aspects of the influences on the personal narrative as it relates to the presented problem so those seeking assistance have more resources as they identify their preferred way of being.

White used the metaphor of life "as a 'membered' club and 'identity' as an 'association' of life."[26] This fluid way of understanding identity as a social construct creates the space for choices to be made about the memberships of life which will be honoured and respected, and which memberships declined. Bons-Storm states, "A recognition that each of us is constructed by social context invites us to play a role in shaping these contexts or choosing the ones with which to affiliate."[27]

Counter-testimony in sermons

It can be argued that *deconstruction* has a strong Judeo-Christian heritage. Heidegger's work laid the path for the French deconstructionist hermeneutic.

25 Michel Foucault and Lawrence D Kritzman, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 155.

26 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 138.

27 Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 138.

Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* and St Paul's critique of human wisdom[28] were flagstones leading to that path. They were formed from the bedrock of the Hebrew Bible where not only do we find critique of the absolutes of history, institutions and society, but what Walter Brueggemann refers to as *countertestimony*: Israel's reiterative critique of its own religious practice and knowledge of Yahweh.

> Deconstruction is in the service of justice and is a practice of justice, because it aims to overcome all injustice that arises from the illusion of a perfect system. But, of course, the *act* of justice does not create a permanent *state* of justice. It is only an act, which needs endlessly to be re-enacted. Thus at bottom, Derrida locates the point of the deconstructive process in a thoroughly Jewish commitment… *Israel as witness knows that if Yahweh is not endlessly criticized and subverted, Yahweh will also become an absolute, absolutizing idol*, the very kind about which Moses aimed his protesting, deconstructive work at Sinai.[29]

This aspect of deconstructive work—the questioning and subverting of totalising descriptions, absolutising discourse and oppressive power—has often been written about in relation to theology and preaching. In Martha Nussbaum's exploration of the interaction of narrative and emotion, for example, she writes about the "unwriting of stories",[30] making "a strong case for the social significance of narrative, both in its role as transmitter of a culture's beliefs, attitudes and emotions, and in its capacity of criticizing the dominant culture through the "unwriting" of the dominant narratives and the writing of an alternative account."[31]

Walter Wink's analysis of "The Powers" explores the Scriptural concept of "principalities and powers" as

> the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power. As the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the "within" of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organisation of power. As the outer aspect they are the political systems, appointed officials ...—… the tangible manifestations which power takes.

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28 1 Cor 1:17-31 quoting from Is 29:14

29 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 332.

30 Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Pub Co, 1989), 226.

31 Stanley Hauerwas and L Gregory Jones, "Introduction: Why Narrative?" in Stanley Hauerwas and L Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Pub Co,1989), 13,14.

He continues,

> When a particular Power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic. The church's task is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purposes in the world…[32]

The same message has also been a common thread in Walter Brueggemann's work. In *The Prophetic Imagination,* for example, he urges prophetic preachers to summon congregations to become alternative communities within the dominant culture.[33] A similar call is issued by Charles Campbell in *A Word before the Powers* where he calls for preaching to model the deconstruction of limiting and life-denying discourse, and the formation of a "community of resistance."[34] In the light of God's grace we can learn to look beyond the limiting "truths" about ourselves or our culture.

John McClure uses the philosophical framework of Levinas to explore the potential positive impact of deconstructive critique within homiletics. McClure defines his task as "motivated and sustained by an *ethical* concern to reorient preaching towards the "other," to situate preaching as a radical act of compassionate responsibility,"[35] and therefore seeks to find "a form of preaching that is constantly interrupted by the proximity of the other, by an obligation to the other, and by what Levinas calls the "glory of the Infinite" given in the face of the other.[36] He applies a deconstructive technique to "the homiletic relationship to Scripture, tradition, experience and reason", proposing "a homiletic that "others" itself in an "absolute obligation toward compassion, resistance, justice and hope."[37]

Each of these authors acknowledges that out of the authority given by those with whom they are in dialogue, the narrative practitioner and the preacher have the

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32 Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, ed. Walter Wink, The Powers ; V. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5.

33 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

34 Charles L Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching,* 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

35 John S McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 7.

36 Ibid., 9. , citing O E Ajzenstat, "Beyond Totality: The Shoah and the Biblical Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas." In *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust,* edited by Tod Linafelt, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 144.

37 Ibid., 134.

responsibility to aid the active deconstruction of oppressive and unhelpful discourse. Speaking from the perspective of those that listen, Brueggemann challenges the preacher:

> If the analogy of Zedekiah works at all, then we have not shown up for utterance in order to be entertained or numbed or instructed in the passion of the day. We have come to find out if there is a word from outside our circumstance, from outside our closed system of reality that could open the system—personal or public or both—to fresh air and new light.[38]

The preacher has been appointed and trained to name things as they are.

This pointed proclamation sits in tension with the spaciousness referred to in the two previous chapters, where openness and metaphor were being encouraged as ways to facilitate the making of meaning. Rather than being oppositional approaches, specificity and indeterminateness are two sides of the one coin. Where our immersion in the discourse of our society and community clouds our vision, precision in questions or words without ambiguity may bring clarity. Where we have seen only dimly, the gaps left by scaffolded conversation or opened up by fresh metaphors may bring light.

Hugo Kamya opens "Narrative Practice and Culture" with a moving description of a silent encounter with his brother, ill with HIV.

> *My brother, Henry, lay in one corner of the living room in the little house in which I grew up. ... I wondered about his own emotions and the many other issues this scene represented. I recalled that he once asked of me, "Take care of my children," he had said. What did it all mean now?*

He closes the description with a set of questions about the picture. The same questions could be applied to a text being contemplated in sermon preparation:

> *... How might this picture speak about larger forces of stories within the family? The culture? What narratives are evoked in this picture? How do these narratives gain dominance over others that are marginalized? What stories of justice or injustice do they pronounce? How does this picture speak about the obligations / responsibilities of richer nations in the face of deprivation?*[39]

38 Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 4.

39 Hugo Kamya, "Narrative Practice and Culture," in *Advancing Social Justice through Clinical Practice*, ed. Etiony Aldarondo (Mahwah, New Jersey; London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007), 207.

The deconstructive questions we may ask of the text range from broad, societal-wide questions, to ones arising out of awareness of the social forces at work within localised sub-cultures. On the final Sunday of the 2009 Church Year, James Winderlich, the English-language pastor of the congregation with whom I worship, preached a sermon that well illustrates this responsibility. Unfortunately there is no recording or transcript available, but a handout summary captures the major movement of the sermon.

That Kamya was thinking of the big questions raised in the intimacy of the spacious silence that can surround sitting with someone in their dying fits with my experience. However when a friend commented, "What an odd thing to think in the presence of his brother," I was reminded again of how socially constructed are our own modes of expression—even our internal self-talk. As a narrative therapist, the questions Kamya was asking in the immediacy of his experience were shaped by the language, concepts and constructs of his craft.

Being Judged and Condemned

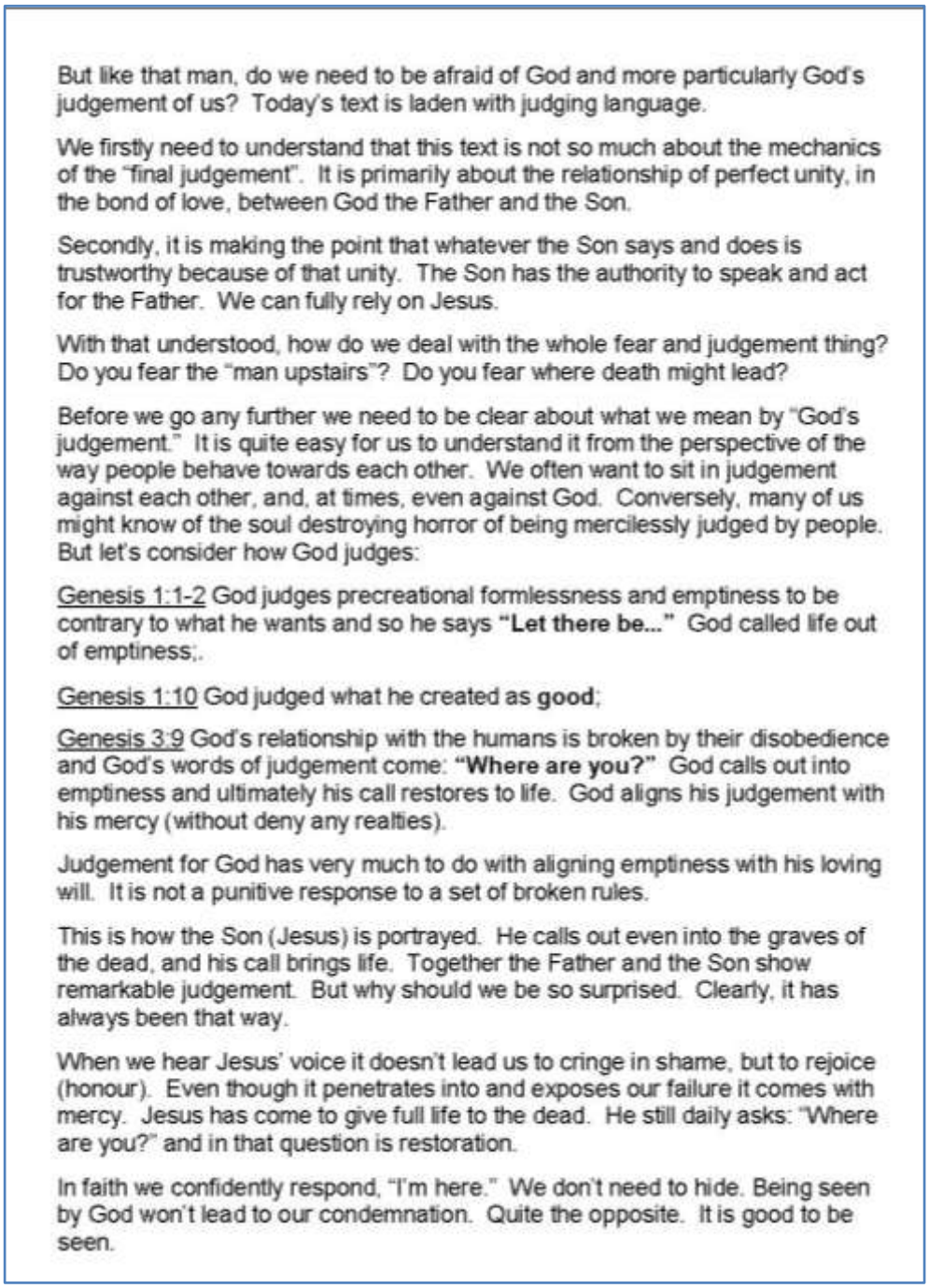
[21]Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. [22]The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, [23]so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. [24]Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. [25] 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. [26]For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; [27]and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. [28]Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice [29]and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. John 5:21-29 NRSV

Hungrybeast is a social and media review on ABC television. It screens at 9pm on Wednesday nights (ABC 1).

In last week's episode (18/11/2009) people from "off the street" were asked: *"What do you fear?"*

A variety of predictable responses were offered that had a lot to do with personal wellbeing: Safety, Health, Relationships and Living with Change. One response, however, surprised me. It came from a solid, strapping man who said: "*I fear nobody [pause to consider] probably the man upstairs. The Lord Jesus Christ. That's probably the only man I fear. I fear no one.*"

I have no idea by what that man specifically meant by what he said. Was it a sincere proclamation of faith or was he covering his bases? Was it an evangelically pious utterance that came as the result of a conditioned religious upbringing? That is, he'd been taught to say this irrespective of whether he believed it or not – he was afraid to not say it. Who knows?



But like that man, do we need to be afraid of God and more particularly God's judgement of us? Today's text is laden with judging language.

We firstly need to understand that this text is not so much about the mechanics of the "final judgement". It is primarily about the relationship of perfect unity, in the bond of love, between God the Father and the Son.

Secondly, it is making the point that whatever the Son says and does is trustworthy because of that unity. The Son has the authority to speak and act for the Father. We can fully rely on Jesus.

With that understood, how do we deal with the whole fear and judgement thing? Do you fear the "man upstairs"? Do you fear where death might lead?

Before we go any further we need to be clear about what we mean by "God's judgement." It is quite easy for us to understand it from the perspective of the way people behave towards each other. We often want to sit in judgement against each other, and, at times, even against God. Conversely, many of us might know of the soul destroying horror of being mercilessly judged by people. But let's consider how God judges:

Genesis 1:1-2 God judges precreational formlessness and emptiness to be contrary to what he wants and so he says **"Let there be..."** God called life out of emptiness;.

Genesis 1:10 God judged what he created as **good**;

Genesis 3:9 God's relationship with the humans is broken by their disobedience and God's words of judgement come: **"Where are you?"** God calls out into emptiness and ultimately his call restores to life. God aligns his judgement with his mercy (without deny any realties).

Judgement for God has very much to do with aligning emptiness with his loving will. It is not a punitive response to a set of broken rules.

This is how the Son (Jesus) is portrayed. He calls out even into the graves of the dead, and his call brings life. Together the Father and the Son show remarkable judgement. But why should we be so surprised. Clearly, it has always been that way.

When we hear Jesus' voice it doesn't lead us to cringe in shame, but to rejoice (honour). Even though it penetrates into and exposes our failure it comes with mercy. Jesus has come to give full life to the dead. He still daily asks: "Where are you?" and in that question is restoration.

In faith we confidently respond, "I'm here." We don't need to hide. Being seen by God won't lead to our condemnation. Quite the opposite. It is good to be seen.

Fig 1: "Being Judged and Condemned". Bulletin insert for Sunday, 22nd November, 2009. James Winderlich, St Stephen's Lutheran Church, Adelaide

For some of my friends and acquaintances who grew up within the Lutheran church in the mid-twentieth century, Christianity was a harsh and condemnatory religion. The all-seeing eye of a judgmental God controlled behaviour and relationships. Elizabeth Koepping made the following observations as the result of her interviews with older members of *Hope*, a pseudonymous Australian Lutheran community:

> The Trinity controls: God the Father rules, plans, punishes: Christ redeems the unworthy rather than breaks rules, while Jesus the man ... supports... The Holy Spirit, explained an old lady, far from being the empowering immanence of modern time, "tries to control and help us. If we go against him—by not wanting forgiveness or by a wrong way of living—that will never be forgiven. We must ask the Holy Spirit to govern and control us." The Holy Spirit was subsumed under the authoritarian Father, Hope's Trinitarian faith being effectively Binitarian.[40]

The experience of being nurtured within a church that proclaims judgement is shared by many: a longitudinal study of religious beliefs and values in the US concluded that just under a half of those surveyed believed in a judgemental God.[41] The oppressive discourses the preacher has an obligation to disrupt arise not only outside of the church, but within it. To provide counter-testimony to the exclusionary and judgemental narrative of bad religion is our Gospel calling.

In his exploration of the lectionary Gospel for the day, Winderlich explores the belief in a judgemental God, and the fear that is inherent in it. He wonders how the man interviewed on "Hungry Beast" had come to his understanding of God as one to be feared. By using the example of this individual's comment, he effectively asks the questions about how such views have been able to gain prominence in the spiritual landscape. The same Biblical witness that has often been used to speak of God's condemnation—including the story of the Fall in Genesis 3—is drawn on to speak of "God who calls out into emptiness and ultimately … restores to life. God aligns his judgement with his mercy… Judgement for God has very much to do with aligning emptiness with his loving will. It is not a punitive response to a set of broken rules." Winderlich goes on to invite those listening to rejoice in God's invitation and presence, confident of God's mercy.

The theological inclinations and expectations regarding sermons of the members of St Stephen's congregation mean that proclaiming this alternative view of

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40 Elizabeth Koepping, *Food, Friends and Funerals: On Lived Religion* (Berlin: Lit; London:Global [distributor] 2008), 191.

41 Byron R Johnson, Rodney Stark, Christopher D Bader, Paul Froese, F Carson Mencken. (2008) Baylor University Survey of American Religion [SOAR]: Longitudinal survey of religious beliefs and values. Research funded by the John Templeton Foundation. http://www.baylor.edu/isreligion/index.php?id=40634, accessed 21/7/2008

The survey found 31.4 percent believed in an Authoritarian God, judgemental and engaged; 16 percent a Critical God, judgmental but not engaged; 25 percent a Benevolent God, and 23 percent a Distant God.

judgement is unlikely to be met with resistance. This cannot be assumed in all contexts. I recall, for example, a conversation with an elderly member of a Sydney congregation for which I was Pastoral Associate. He described the sermons of our pastor as "milk" and his need for something "meatier". The conversations that occurred in the months following his making this comment led me to the conclusion that he was looking for the legalistic declarations he had heard from previous pastors. There was discontinuity between the God-story he was hearing and the one he had incorporated into his own framework of meaning.

Many of the English language publications regarding deconstruction and homiletics come from the USA. The examples used to illustrate the necessity of deconstructive preaching are often variations on a theme of the impact of the concept of manifest destiny on American Christianity. Stephen Johnson paints with a broad brush the impact of Empire ideology; he sees consumerism as the economic manifestation of Enlightenment philosophy, and colonialism and European superiority as its political manifestation.

> This political hegemony is an unchallenged rationale for privilege and advantage in the world in every zone of life. It means not only political ascendancy and economic domination, but it also makes its adherents the norm for virtue.
>
> Finally, this ideology becomes intertwined with *religion*, in general, and what is means to be "Christian," in particular. Truth is tried to Western virtue and Western virtue is fed by an ideological form of Christian faith. Such religious ideology is woven into American political and economic life and too often the church's preaching has become the mouthpiece for American ideology.[42]

As I am writing this section, Independence Day is being celebrated in the USA. The on-line social network I participate in is lively with discussion about patriotism and Christianity, and how/whether one should acknowledge the holiday within the Sunday service. The discussion provides a good illustration of one of the difficulties with prophetic preaching. We become emotionally connected to ideas that influence us. Perhaps because the personal narrative carries the discourse of our communities, the ideas we embrace, and our identity, they are so closely aligned that we can imagine that a questioning of ideas is a personal attack.

42 Stephen C Johnson, "To Say, "Come, Lord Jesus": Preaching as Open-Ended Confession," in *Academy of Homiletics 2007 Annual Meeting: Honoring the "Other": preaching across the divides* (Minneapolis, MN: The Academy of Homiletics, 2007), 210.

Ekaterina Jorniak comments that students in narrative practice sometimes have difficulties in "imagining people as separate from the ideas that influence them, and in believing in the practical possibility of creating space for reflection about these beliefs."[43] She has designed a role-play exercise for helping students differentiate between ideas and those that bear the idea, with an interviewer asking a series of deconstructive questions of an *Idea* (personified), with the bearer of the *Idea* observing. The questions would typically include:

- when did the Idea emerge?
- was it present in all cultures in all time periods?
- who created it?
- whose interests did it serve during different times—what groups of people or what social institutes did it serve?
- what are its functions in society?
- when did it experience good times and when bad times?
- who are its social allies, and who are its rivals in the world of people, and in the world of ideas?[44]

A second set of questions is asked regarding the relationship of the *Idea* to the bearer. The style of questioning used in the exercise helps to illustrate that we do have a choice about our relationship to ideas, and the influence they have in our life.

When a sermon is critiquing a set of ideas or beliefs, a similar approach can assist us to differentiate ourselves from the beliefs and ideas. The words of the sermon can invite and create space for a discussion about our relationship to those ideas or beliefs, and the influence we want those ideas or beliefs to have in our lives. The listener will be less likely to become angry or defensive, as they are less likely to feel under personal attack.

In a therapeutic encounter, deconstructive questions aim to shine a bright light on subjugating discourse, revealing its influence so that choices can be made. Similarly, in the sermon, we seek to shine a bright light on those things that subjugate human beings, or to use Janet Walton's words, "whatever hurts, hides, or dishonours."[45]

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43 Ekaterina Jorniak, "Teaching Theory and Deconstruction," *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, no. 1 (2008): 59.

44 Ibid.

45 Janet Walton, *Feminist Liturgy: a Matter of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 92 as cited in Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change*, 74.

Within the therapeutic context, deconstructive questions can flow at a pace that is set by the verbal and non-verbal responses of those engaged in the conversation, and remain focussed on those things that are important to those in dialogue. The preparation of the sermon, however, is completed with only the imagining of the congregation's composition and its response to guide the "conversation". Without the cues to pacing and values that a true dialogue entails, extra care needs to be taken in deconstructive preaching so that those listening do not draw the conclusion that the one preaching is attacking all that is old and familiar.

In her book *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change,* Barbara Lundblad draws on the insights of Elizabeth Johnson to provide further ideas on how to approach the difficult issues that the preaching commission requires of us. She suggests ways of "respectful, creative braiding of the old and new": "when challenging an oppressive text ... lift up other stories in the Bible..."; using familiar words and song in the liturgical context of a challenging sermon; intentionally "naming and claiming" important aspects of traditional understanding that we can affirm, not only in the sermon, but also in the opportunities provided for congregational response through song and litany.[46]

A client of White, "Paul"—himself a counsellor—developed some ideas for bringing heightened sensitivity into the counselling situation to "open space for conversations about that which usually cannot be spoken of." One idea, recorded in a transcript of a therapeutic conversation with White, was to prelude a difficult line of inquiry with words such as, "Right now I would like to share with you the sort of questions that I would be asking you if it wasn't for my apprehension about how you might respond to them. I would appreciate it if you would reflect on these questions, and then tell me about whether or not this apprehension would be valid if I was to ask you these questions."

The group gathered to listen to a sermon may be a relatively stable group of people from Sunday to Sunday for many years. This is quite different from the counselling context, where an individual or group is likely to be meeting with the interlocutor for only a small number of sessions. It is even more important in preaching than in counselling, therefore, that such questions arise out of a genuine

46 Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change,* 80.

sense of curiosity and entering dialogue, rather than being a technique. Unless the language is natural, it could be identified as a manipulative tool by those listening.

Using her extended metaphor of "the Stones", Lundblad speaks of "testing the stones".[47] The questions that she asks—in this instance of church polity or Scripture—are questions about the relationship of these things to the central tenets of Christian faith as expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus. "For Christian believers, texts and traditions are tested through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection."[48]

The paradox

The central message of Christianity challenges many of the dominant values of our society—that justice is about right and wrong, that receipt of gift (material or otherwise) implies obligation, that self-care has the highest priority … The person of Jesus incarnating God's love to the world, radically oriented toward God and God's sovereignty, and giving expression to the reality of the God who is concerned about humanity, shows us alternative truths that have been rendered invisible in societal discourse.

Katie Geneva Cannon writes,

> I have long known that grace is an unmerited gift from God. However, not until recently did I understand grace as a sacred, life-transforming power for those of us whose identities are shaped by multiple forces at odds with the dominant culture, primarily those of race, sex and class. God's freely given gift of grace enables us to resist the forces of death and degradation arrayed against us and to affirm our dignity as beloved persons created in the image of God.[49]

Such gospel declarations raise again an apparent paradox of this thesis. The orienting principles of narrative practice are drawn from the post-modern writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, strongly related to social or relational constructionism. Post-modern thought challenges the notions of unexamined universal truths or metanarratives, and seeks to deconstruct privileged

47 Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change*, 74.

48 Ibid., 75.

49 Katie Geneva Cannon, "Transformative Grace", in Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 139.

discourses.[50] It seems audacious to suggest that practice based on this set of principles can be congruent with reflection on preaching within the Christian church. While narrative practitioners believe their role is to make judgments about neither the pre-existing narrative and its constitutive discourses, nor the reauthored narrative and any new constructions, as preachers we believe we have a responsibility to name that which is oppressive. Walter Wink, for example, calls on the church to expose "the delusional system" of oppression, "for the Powers are never more powerful than when they can act from concealment."[51] Walter Brueggemann challenges preachers to proclaim "a script that is *not controlled by, contaminated by, or intruded upon by the hegemonic power* of the Empire."[52] We believe we have a call to proclaim a God of grace.

In Chapter One the commitment of narrative practitioners to personal and social liberation is named as a connecting link between narrative practice and preaching.[53] The aim of liberation theology, to offer a voice of resistance in the face of powerlessness, mirrors that of narrative practice. Therapy is understood as a political process and the task of finding preferred stories and identities as one which is nested within the practice of challenging subjugating societal practices and beliefs. Narrative practice does not seek to be non-directive; there is instead an attitude of rigorous accountability and responsibility toward change away from the problematic. Questions will be asked regarding the effects of the problem, and then further clarification is sought regarding evaluation of the effects, as the therapist will not assume the identified effects are either negative or positive. When the one seeking assistance has identified effects as being negative or life-limiting they will then be asked why this is so; there is no assumption that this is self-evident. In justifying the evaluation of the effects of a problem, those seeking assistance will begin articulating their "preferences for living." [54]

50 Jill M S W Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1996), 193.

51 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, ed. Walter Wink, The Powers ; V. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 88.

52 Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of home : preaching among exiles* (1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 43.

53 Page 34.

54 Morgan, *What Is Narrative Therapy?: An Easy-to-Read Introduction*, 43.

This process does not create space for narrative practitioners to impose values and commitments on those who have sought their assistance, nor to introduce discourse or story lines foreign to the personal narrative. So the recognition that liberation is a connecting link cannot justify the parallels I draw between narrative practice and preaching if preaching is proclamation of universal truth, if it aims to impose another storyline, or if it is a norming activity through the imposition of the values and commitments of that storyline. If these aims are intrinsic to preaching, it would seem drawing insights from the one practice to apply to the other would be inappropriate.

Relationship the common core

The central role of *relationship* in the formation of identity and meaning, however, does provide a path for exploring the apparent paradox of linking postmodern epistemology and kerygma. Included in the key features of a narrative epistemology as outlined in Chapter One is that the personal story "is negotiated with our culture, society and community, within a web of relationships."[55] Freedman and Coombs state: "As social constructionists, we view 'self' not as a core or essential or preordained entity, but as something that we constitute in relationship with other people."[56] The messages we receive from others about ourselves and the world impact the dynamic reauthoring of our personal narrative[57] and therefore our knowledge of ourselves and our world, and the way we live out our narrative in our interaction with the world.

Our personal narrative is the vehicle for the reality created by the set of beliefs we have acquired through our relationship with society and the world. Narrative practice does not depend on each of the "characters" within the therapeutic conversations being physically present human beings with their own articulated personal narrative. While the time-boundedness of narrative makes proposing a narrative epistemology for God too limited, what we know of God is through God's encounter with us within human time-bound history, and in the record of God's relationship with God's creation as found in the rocks and the stars. When our

55 Page 26.

56 Freedman and Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, 268.

57 Francis Jacques, *Difference and Subjectivity: Dialogue and Personal Identity* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Pr., 1991), 31.

personal narrative embraces the possibility of relationship with a non-human other, it opens up another way of thinking about preaching from within the narrative epistemological perspective.

From the pulpit we proclaim a relational God. It has become commonplace within post-modern theological writing to see humanity as *imago dei* not in being[58] or in rationality,[59] but in relationality. As Stanley Grenz points out,

> In a sense, the relational description of God—speaking of the divine reality in terms of God's relationship to creation—is inevitable. We have no other vantage point from which to view God than his gracious condescending to us in what we call "revelation". … Revelation … is the self-disclosure of God-in-relation.[60]

This resonates with Catherine Mowry LaCugna's exploration of Trinitarian Theology, *God For Us,* as summarised in her statement:

> The heart of Christian life is the encounter with a personal God who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other. ... [T]he trinitarian mystery of God is a dynamic and personal self-sharing that is realised over time and within the context of human history and personality.[61]

Part of a reauthoring process of narrative practice is to render visible the supportive network of social relationships. The honouring of relationships that is central to narrative practice does not require the continuing visible presence of those so recalled. Persons of significance with whom someone is no longer in contact can be brought to mind, as can those who are deceased:

> Because our psychological relationships with the people we love do not end when they die, therapists using narrative ideas can often

58 Grenz explores the history of the development of the concept of *analogia relationis* (particularly as it relates to the "duality of male and female as the defining human relationship"). Barth accepted Bonhoeffer's concept as "a way of avoiding the analogy of being, which in his estimation erroneously assumed some type of correspondence or similarity between the being of God and the being of humankind." Stanley J Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the 'Imago Dei'*, The Matrix of Christian Theology:1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 296.

59 Augustine is perhaps most cited for his support of rationality being the location of God's image in humanity (*De Trinitate XVI.v.6* Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. E. Hill, vol. 1 The Trinity, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), 470); the notion was affirmed by Aquinas *Summa theologiae* Q 93, aa.2,6 (Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on the Divine Nature: Summa Theologiae I, 1-13*, trans. Brian J Shanley, The Hackett Aquinas (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), 313.)

60 Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the 'Imago Dei'*, 81.

61 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 319-20.

> encourage clients to contemplate the imagined reactions of a loved one who, though dead, is very much alive in the client's heart or mind. Such relationships can be explored and may become important sources of support and encouragement as the client develops new or more positive self-descriptions.[62]

Those seeking assistance may be invited to recall people who might affirm changes as being congruent with values expressed earlier in their life. Sometimes significant individuals are invited to observe therapeutic sessions and bring their own reflections to them. Sometimes as a result of the questions asked in sessions, those seeking assistance take the initiative to re-connect with people with whom they have lost contact. Through highlighting the existence of relationships that are supportive of the preferred ways of being, the story lines of those aspects of identity that fit with the re-authored narrative are seen to have a history and a context.

The insistence that a narrative counsellor take a decentred position is not a statement that those who are seeking assistance must somehow find their own answers; rather, in addition to giving priority to the personal stories and skills of those seeking assistance, it is to ensure that the therapeutic conversation is nested within the experience of the historical and socio-relational context of both the problem and the preferred narrative. Supportive relationships and chosen affiliations can be called upon as part of stepping into and exploring "some of the neglected territories of their lives."[63]

Similarly, from this perspective, preaching can be thought of as highlighting relationship connections and an exploration of the chosen associations of life rather than the imposition of values and commitments.[64] When someone walks through the door of a preaching venue, they have already made a decision regarding membership in a specific context and set of relationships, or are actively exploring it. Preaching may help make visible the history, the current parameters and the future implications of the chosen social context within the Christian community.

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62 Gerald Monk et al., *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 21.

63 White, "Workshop Notes", 9.

64 cf first paragraph of page 121.

Central to that Christian community, in its origin and continuing existence, is the "dynamic and personal self-sharing" [65] of God. Preaching may be broadly understood as a multifaceted exploration of the implications of relationship with God. Ethical preaching is the exploration of relationships with each other, in the light of relationship with God. Preaching about the church and its mission is an exploration of the stories of "our communion with each other" which is a relationship gift of the Holy Spirit.[66] Testimonial preaching is proclamation regarding the relationship between God and the one preaching. Whatever the aim of preaching, ultimately it can be conceptualised as an attempt to render more visible the relationship that God has with us. This is congruous with David Randolph's definition of preaching as an encounter with the living God.[67]

LaCugna proposes that in that encounter is also found a definition of what constitutes *truth:*

> there will always be many theologies and doctrines, and no meta-theological standpoint, neither ecclesiastical nor biblical, from which to adjudicate among differences. While the theologian strives within the context of a whole tradition of interpretation to achieve *orthodoxy*, or right opinion about the economy, right perception of the glory of God, the criterion for theological truth remains the Spirit of God who transforms our inarticulate words into praise.[68]

Truth about God is found when that same God, with whom we have a relationship, enables us to praise. Preaching which speaks truth is preaching that both arises out of and leads back to worship.

Thomas Rogers tells his preaching students, "the only meaningful thanks we can give God is to be who God created and intends us to be. We know what it is to be authentically human by looking at Jesus and the Law."[69] He goes on to explain:

> The sermon proclaims the *identity* of people who have heard the gospel and how those people *act* in the world. They are different people now; they will live differently. However, the preacher does not call hearers to aspire to a new reality; the preacher proclaims the existence and nature of that new reality in the wake of an encounter

65 LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 320.

66 Ibid., 319.

67 David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 14.

68 LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 381.

69 Thomas G Rogers, "What and How of North American Lutheran Preaching " *Dialog* 43, no. 4 (2004): 267.

> with the Living Christ. … From the pulpit, speech describes and creates the *identity* of those who hear the gospel, along with describing and creating how Christians live and move in the world.[70]

When we are in relationship with another, our personal narrative intersects with theirs. Our shared life contributes to our story, and to the decisions we make about the alliances we choose.

Our shared life therefore has an impact on the identity and meaning of each of the partners. The insight of process theology that in interaction with God's creation which is constantly changing, God can change,[71] makes space for applying this to our relationship with God. Unless God is changed by relationship, no relationship exists. The events of our lives have an impact on God's narrative which is written in God's creation. While I am not positing a personal narrative for God, Scripture affirms that who we are and what we do matters to the one who is aware of how many hairs grow on our head... .[72]

Beyond anthropocentrism

Another potential criticism of an approach to preaching that embraces a narrative epistemology is that the emphasis on identity and socio-cultural context reinforces our tendency to think and act as if humanity is central to creation. By opening up the conceptual model to embrace relationship with God, a larger vision can be incorporated of interrelationship with all of creation.

Denis Edwards has brought particular clarity to thinking about our relationship to the universe. In *How God acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action*, he begins by describing the pattern, identified by the various branches of science, of constitutive relationships throughout the universe:

> At each level, entities are constituted from other entities structured in differentiated and cooperative interrelationships. … Entities emerge and exist in such patterns of interrelationship. These include not only

70 Ibid., 269.

71 John B Cobb, *The Process Perspective: Frequently Asked Questions About Process Theology*, ed. Jeanyne B Slettom (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 32.

72 Lk 12:7

> the interrelationship between the constituents that make up an entity, but also the interrelationship between the entity and its environment.[73]

Moving from science to theology, from the empirically observable to that which can only be seen with the eyes of faith, Edwards explores

> the most important constitutive relationship of all, one that operates on a radically different level from all the others[:]… the relationship of ongoing creation. This is the relationship by which the indwelling Creator Spirit is present in each creature, enabling it to be and to become in a world of interconnected relationships.[74]

Edwards argues that a Christian theology attributes the interrelationships postulated by science to the "Trinitarian God of mutual relations." Because we participate in the life of the One in whom relationship is located, we are related to all of creation.

The initial concept of the personal narrative introduced in this study was the narrative as the vehicle for the reality we create through the perception filter acquired through our relationship with society *and the world*.[75] What we know of God is through God's action within the created world. This context implies that if preaching is highlighting relationship connections and the chosen associations of life, it not only points us to the Creator but to a relationship with, and therefore some measure of responsibility for, that which is created.

Deconstruction of Scripture

The starting point of this digression—those aspects of the popular image of preaching that include imposition of norms and values—necessitates consideration of the status of Scripture within this discussion. Within my own tradition, it is considered 'the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.'[76] From that perspective, how can an approach to

73 Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Hindmarsh, S. Aust.: ATF Theology, 2010), 5.

74 Ibid., 6.

75 This is the basic narrative development of Gregory Bateson's suggestion that we create our reality through the set of beliefs so acquired. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: a Revolutionary Approach to Man's Understanding of Himself,* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), passim.

76 Commission on Theology and Interchurch Relations, "Towards a Common Understanding of the Authority of Scripture," (Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia: Lutheran Church of Australia, 1984), quoting "Formula of Concord, Epitome 1" from *Book of Concord*, edited by T.G.Tappert , 464.

Scripture for preaching be other than as a meta-narrative, the focus of the deconstructive efforts of the postmodern movement?

The Bible is the foundation for the major discursive explorations of the Christian community. It could therefore be conceived of as being the group narrative of the Christian community. Some churches proudly boast that they are "Bible-based" or "Bible-believing", and those who do not choose such labelling generally refer in their constituting documents to the Bible as central to their life together. It is widely accepted as the written record of God's action in the world.

Like any discursive construction, many voices have contributed to the canon, and it is multi-storied. Despite the multi-voiced character of the Bible being self-evident, there are many who attempt to reduce its message to a single linear narrative. Certain styles of reading and interpreting Scripture—included within the breadth of Biblical literalism or Biblical fundamentalism—consider as virtuous the perception of Scripture as a unified whole.

When this approach to Scripture is viewed through the lens of a narrative epistemology, it is seen as problematic. Central to the narrative epistemology that has informed narrative practice is the concept that the personal or group narrative is multi-storied or multi-stranded. Narrative practice does not support essentialist notions of the self, but a multi-storied understanding of identity. Thin narratives and totalising descriptions are impoverishing of people's lives. Through narrative inquiry, neglected strands of one's experience are explored so that the personal narrative might be thickened and enriched. Attention is drawn to those parts of the personal narrative which speak about the preferred way of being.

When the (written) group narrative of the Christian church is flattened in an attempt to define truth or orthodoxy it becomes a document of exclusion, the type of totalising grand narrative that is rightly criticised by Lyotard and his successors. Mark Currie argues that despite different starting points and theoretical journeys, Derrida and Foucault reach a very similar conclusion regarding the construction of exclusion through the linear narrative:[77] those exercising the structures of power and authority seek to rearrange and efface difference to produce a stable, unified narrative. Within the Christian church, concerns about orthodoxy and unity have

77 Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Transitions (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 87.

often led to the suppressing of diversity of interpretation and even to rendering invisible the multiple voices of scripture. Like the totalising impact of understanding an individual's identity through a single strand of their personal narrative, any community attempting to live through a single consistent story is thereby impoverished. Individuals and congregations that adopt a fundamentalist or Biblical literalist approach to Scripture are places ripe for exclusion. An exclusion of "incorrect" theology and exclusion of non-conforming people go hand in hand.

Benedict Anderson suggests that a nation, rather than being a physical reality, is "an *imagined community* to which individuals affiliated themselves."[78] Given the amorphous nature of its geographic boundaries, the church, or more specifically, a denomination of the church, is even more so. And as an *imagined community* it is equally a powerful political idea. Any attempt at representation through a totalising narrative will exclude and marginalise the elements that are not considered to represent the essence. The same process that defines identity places others outside of that identity, whether they be of women in ministry, gays at the communion table, or people, to whom God has revealed Godself outside of the Christian faith, as children of that same God.

The reasoning through which Foucault and Derrida reach the conclusion that history cannot be known from any single narrative, brings us to an awareness that a single narrative cannot contain all that we know of God and God's action in the world, that is, theology. Exclusion of "the other" is not just a symptom of a type of fundamentalism or biblical literalism, but is inherent in any demand for interpretation through a single story. Everything written in Scripture is itself a construction, reflecting human understandings and experiences. The narrative carries within it values and assumptions, and we make choices about which of those we want to celebrate, live and transmit. Our use of Scripture is influenced as much by political and ideological practices as any societal discourse.

To apply deconstructive efforts to Scripture is not about denying its foundational status for the Christian community,[79] but is about disrupting

78 Ibid., 91.

79 There are many within the Christian community that fear the impact of postmodernism and its call for the deconstruction of metanarratives, seeing it as a challenge to very existence of Christianity. See, for example http://www.christiancadre.org/topics/postmodern.html, accessed 30/7/2008. This website has links to a variety of sources regarding Christianity and postmodernism:

universalised truth claims and about rendering visible the assumptions behind our interpretations and practices. Preparing to preach is not value free. Tools brought to textual analysis have their own power relations. Our hermeneutical principles are a constructed product. As part of an argument regarding the secular nature of Biblical criticism, Wink says,

> Under the guise of scientific objectivity and antiseptic disinterestedness, the legitimating authority of traditional belief has been seized and bent to the service of new legitimations by a new authority. By claiming a scientific character this new world view has been able for several centuries to disguise its ideological nature.[80]

However an appropriate response to this critique is not to discard the tools, but in addition to being clear about our assumptions and processes, to cover all our scholarship with the universal truth claim that God is a gracious God, and utilise our scholarship motivated by our concern to preach faithfully, out of our "absolute obligation toward compassion, resistance, justice and hope."[81]

Anna Carter Florence observes,

> Postmodern practices are not for the purpose of demolition. They are for the purpose of encounter; and with encounter, insight; and with insight, the chance to make right. In truth, such practices offer us a gift by opening up ethical space for us to make new decisions on behalf of the other.[82]

This is precisely the motivation behind McClure's choice of Levinas to guide his explorations in *Otherwise Preaching.*[83] The deconstruction of "those things that authorize" homiletics is not to silence the proclamation but to call it to itself.

This section began by consideration of the deconstruction of oppressive societal discourse through the alternative views offered by Scripture. It moved through considering the deconstruction of the authorities for our preaching. Now a

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http://www.boundless.org/features/a0000917.html, accessed 30/7/2008. This quote summarises the webmaster's perspective: "…postmodernism continues to thrive on campus. As I shall argue in my next article, its growing acceptance amongst Christians will have disastrous effects on discipleship."

80 Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 36.

81 McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, 134, previously quoted in this chapter on page 110.

82 Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xv.

83 McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*.

word needs to be said about the deconstruction of preaching itself. It is not enough to challenge oppressive power without recognising our own complicity with the abuse of power.

Florence summarises succinctly:

> Deconstruction … permits us to uncover the masked priorities and power dynamics of a text that may warp its authority structures, and so create ingrown systems that lead to oppression and suffering. …[W]hen we deconstruct something, such as preaching, we allow it to *show itself more clearly* so that we can see the things that make it what it is. This may include exposing ways in which preaching, for example, appeals to its authority structures (the Scriptures, tradition, experience, and reason) in order to end discussion, suppress difference, and silence debate…[84]

The deconstruction of preaching is an iterative process of continuing awareness by those charged to preach, of the responsibility toward the other that this entails. Narrative practitioners make a commitment to reflexive practice. The same approach of curiosity that is taken toward ideas and beliefs within the therapeutic situation is taken toward the therapy itself. Where do these ideas come from? Who created them? Whose interest do they serve? White "is careful not to engage in any move without checking it out. 'Is this alright with you?' is a frequent question", Lynn Hoffman comments.[85] Asking whether a certain line of questioning is useful, asking permission to continue on certain paths, inviting the ones seeking assistance to phrase the wording that will be recorded in notes are all techniques that avoid taking an expert position.

Similarly, in preaching, there are questions that need to hang in the air: What subject positions do we create in our role as preacher? What institutional forms are we linked with, and which ones do we want to be linked with? Practices directed at reinforcing a deconstruction of preaching include taking a decentred position, taking seriously accountability to those we serve, particularly those who are marginalised, and actively seeking feedback on our preaching.

84 Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xv.

85 Lynn Hoffman, "Setting Aside the Model in Family Therapy," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 24, no. 2 (1998): 152.

Is anything added?

As I stated early in this chapter, much has been written about the deconstructive task of the preacher. Many references may be found to rendering visible the power relationships, truth claims, assumptions and values of societal discourse, and to refusing to see as natural those things that are socially conditioned. It seems appropriate to ask, therefore, if there is anything that narrative practice has brought to the discussion that is useful.

White's notion of exploring the absent but implicit is not something readily found in the homiletics literature. This technique relies on listening carefully to the stories of the congregation. It therefore serves as a reminder, too, that deconstructive preaching is not only raising a prophetic voice to name that which is oppressive nationally or globally, but explicating that which is oppressive on the local scene as well. The literature regarding deconstruction in preaching tends to focus on big ideas like our subservience to racism, capitalism and the military-industrial complex. Narrative therapy is concerned to address those large issues as they impact on the life of the individual or group that has come to seek assistance, but also notices the small things. The relative intimacy of those elements of discourse that are being made visible in counselling brings us back to the local nature of preaching. The lenses through which the preacher explicates Scripture are multi-focal, with eyes gazing at the individual, moving through the community, and lifted to the larger questions.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE BODY OF CHRIST AND PREACHING

No sermon worth preaching seems complete in itself.

Charles L Rice[1]

On Pentecost Sunday the three language communities of my congregation worshipped together. During the service the children were invited to sit on the steps leading up to the altar, and help make the communion bread. As they poured the wheat, maize, buckwheat, sorghum, rice and mulga flour into the bowl they were told where each grain had originally come from. Later, the children carried the bread and the wine forward while the congregation sang the offertory, "As the grains of wheat once scattered on the hill are gathered into one to become our bread, so may all the people from all the ends of earth be gathered into one in you."[2] Regardless of whether there were any words spoken about unity in Christ, the liturgy itself spoke loudly. A sermon rarely has to stand on its own.

Unlike a novel or most other works of literary value, the sermon has a very specific context. It is preached for a specific group of people at a specific time and place. It is part of the ritual activity undertaken by the community.

When we use the metaphor of the Body of Christ to name the Christian community, in addition to the symbolic connection with the Christ-event and continuing reality, we are acknowledging our interdependence on each other. Any consideration of preaching—and perhaps a social-constructionist consideration of preaching even more so—demands attention to the community context in which it occurs.

The personal narrative contains ideas and metaphors borrowed from and shaped by the discourse of the society in which we are embedded. The narrative is thereby socially constructed, that is, developed within the context of, and interaction with, the web of relationships and the societal discourse. When an individual or

1 Charles Lynvel Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 19.

2 Didache, 2nd Century, adapted and put to music by Marty Haugen in "As the grains of wheat" ©1990, GIA Publications.

group is open to the potentially transformational reauthoring of the personal narrative through the questions raised in a therapeutic encounter, or via the words of sermons, this does not occur in isolation from the totality of discourse communities. Any reauthoring of a personal narrative is unlikely to persist unless supported by the communities to which the person or group belong and the discourse of these communities. It is therefore important for anyone collaborating in the reauthoring to help make explicit the links between the newly structured material and the community context. When the narrative metaphor is applied to either therapy or preaching, the role of the community will be significant in the re-authoring of the personal narrative and in the living out of the reauthored narrative, whether we are considering individual or group transformation.

Expanding the narrative metaphor to acknowledge this context, we could posit that corporate worship provides a community that has the potential to support our 'authorial' work and an audience to our preferred way of being. This chapter introduces narrative practices which explicitly embrace the socio-cultural context of reauthoring and those which draw on the chosen associations of life. Each of the practices is then explored for elements that may be of significance to preaching and its context within the gathering of the Christian community for worship.

An audience for our story

The writings which informed the initial development of narrative therapy, regarding the social context of the meaning that people make from their lives, also mark an appropriate starting point in thinking about the community context. Jerome Bruner, in *Acts of Meaning*, briefly explores the history of conceptions of the Self, noting that the version he calls "the Western Self" views identity as a construction within a cultural-historical context. He comments, the "Self, too must be treated as a construction that, so to speak, proceeds from the outside in as well as the inside out, from culture to mind as well as from mind to culture."[3] He refers to the early research of Kenneth Gergen on the social-construction of identity. Gergen found that for a group of research participants, "interacting with egotists led them to see

3 Jerome S Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 108.

themselves one way, with the self-effacing, another."[4] This and other experiments in social psychology made it clear that people with whom we are interacting make major contributions to the formation of an individual's identity.

Within the discipline of philosophy, similar conclusions have been reached. Hannah Arendt proposed that the unique *who-ness* of each human being is demonstrated only through self-exposure to the Other. [5] In a similar vein, Charles Taylor wrote:

> We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. ...But we are inducted into these in exchange with others. No one acquired the languages needed for self definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us. ...it's not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then can go on to use them for our own purposes on our own. ...We define [our identity] always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us.[6]

The idea that the construction of identity requires interaction with significant others is obvious in a developmental sense. Further, the fluidity of identity proposed within a narrative epistemological framework leaves space for the continuing impact of other persons. Ellington Graves summarises the role of audience on identity formation thus:

> ...audience is a key component to self-construction, and is also one window whereby the collective intrudes upon the individual: "Self... becomes 'dialogue dependent', designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purposes".[7]

Bruner concludes *Acts of Meaning* with a discussion of what he calls "cultural psychology." The cultural milieu surrounding the making of meaning and the formation of the Self includes not only the social and cultural context of the

4 Ibid., 109. Summarising the work of Kenneth J Gergen, *Towards Transformation in Social Knowledge* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982), 17 ff.

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Carles R Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1958), and *The Life of the Mind* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), passim.

6 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33.

7 Ellington Graves, "Theorizing Collective Identity: Structural and Moral Narratives," *Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association* (2006), http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p105306_index.html, quoting Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 101.

present, but the historical experience of the individual, and the "historical circumstances that gave shape to the culture of which they are an expression."[8]

The narrative metaphor assigns these aspects as being encompassed within the personal narrative. Because narrative counsellors are generally sought by people experiencing problem-laden lives, the narrative therapy process aims to assist them to reauthor their personal narrative to embrace their preferred way of being and values. For a reauthored narrative to be resilient for the present and the future, it needs to be grounded in the past. For a reauthored narrative to be resilient it also needs to be grounded in community.

For these reasons, recognition of the socio-cultural context and a deliberate linkage between the reauthored narrative and the communities within which the group or individual live, are both essential to narrative practice.

The writings of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff were very influential on Michael White's explorations of community involvement in therapeutic encounters. From her work with Jewish people in Venice, California, Myerhoff theorises that people make sense of themselves through personal demonstrations and performances of identity. She suggests that the "audiences" for these performances reflect back the images and identity statements in these personal expressions. Intrinsic to the reflection is the interpretation of the expressions that have been witnessed, which iteratively influence the unfolding story of meaning and identity for the one telling it.[9]

Among the elderly citizens of the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center, Myerhoff observed the spontaneous development of "events" which provided avenues for audience reflection. She called these *definitional ceremonies:* "formal patterns of display ... quite predictable, marked by considerable momentum leading up to a crisis, after which, when things had settled down, it appeared that nothing had been accomplished. No internal conflicts were settled, no social realignments made."[10] She suggested that these definitional ceremonies provided a venue for the

8 Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 138.

9 Barbara Myerhoff, ""Life Not Death in Venice": Its Second Life," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W Turner and Edward M Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

10 Ibid., 268.

performance of identity claims, as a response to "a crisis of invisibility and disdain by a more powerful outside society."[11]

Myerhoff's thoughts regarding the role of an audience in the formation of identity laid the path for considerable development regarding the role of witnesses in narrative practice. The founders of narrative practice (Michael White and David Epston) had noticed that when children were presented with certificates acknowledging significant achievements towards minimising the impact of problems in their lives, they eagerly shared these with friends and family. This sharing often resulted in questions being asked, "which provided an opportunity for these children to give an account of the feats signified by the certificate and at times to actually demonstrate their prowess."[12] It became obvious that the opportunity to rehearse significant developments in their lives contributed to the endurance of those developments, and added to them.

After an initial period of encouraging those seeking assistance to find significant people, already in relationship with them, to support them in the preferred developments for their lives, Epston and White discovered that "outsider witnesses" previously unknown to those at the centre of the consultation were also able to assist. These previously unknown persons were also able to enhance the richness and resilience of the preferred developments. In a further development outsider witnesses were included as a reflecting group within the therapeutic session itself.[13] Through exploration of the specific ways that the involvement of outsider witnesses supported and extended preferred developments in the lives of those seeking consultation, a structured approach emerged. Myerhoff's term *definitional ceremony* has been adopted within narrative practice to name this reflection on identity claims and life developments.[14]

11 Ibid., 266.

12 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York; London: W W Norton & Co., 2007), 178.

13 This was inspired by the reflecting-team model developed by Tom Andersen. Tom Andersen, "The Reflecting Team: Dialogue and Meta-Dialogue in Clinical Work," *Family Process* 26(1987).

14 Some of the Narrative Practice literature retains "reflection group" or "audience" as the descriptive term, but "definitional ceremony" is used to differentiate the process from that of Anderson, and to imply the specific formal process outlined above.

Narrative definitional ceremony

A narrative definitional ceremony begins with those at the centre of a consultation being interviewed to encourage the telling of the story of their life as it relates to personal and relationship identity. The story provides a context for exploring the impact on their life of whatever issue has brought them to counselling. This *telling* of the story also enables those participating in the ceremony as outsider witnesses to learn about developments in previously subordinated story-lines which reflect their preferred way of being.

The audience is then given opportunity to reflect on the telling. They are not asked to rehearse the content of the story, but to focus on those aspects of the story that arouse their interest. White prepared the following list of questions to illustrate the type of responses useful within the ceremony.

Categories of response

1. Identifying the expression
As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you?

2. Describing the image
What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

3. Embodying responses

What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

4. Acknowledging Transport

How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?[15]

15 Michael White, "Workshop Notes" (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 2005), 14.

From these examples of responses, it can be seen that the *retelling* is not about making judgements (either positive or negative) on what is heard, or affirming or congratulating those at the centre of the ceremony,[16] but about genuinely responding to the story. While the *telling* is happening, the outsider witnesses remain in the listening position, as do those at the centre of the consultation while the outsider witnesses respond. During the *retelling,* the outsider witnesses engage in dialogue, responding to each other's expressions in a way that builds on the contribution of each other.[17] The therapist's role is to assist the conversation to stay focussed on responses to the actual retelling, rather than wandering into autobiographical reflection, or messages of congratulations or pointing out the positives in the story.

The witnesses then return to their audience position, for a second retelling, or *retelling of the retelling.* Those at the centre of the ceremony are interviewed using the same categories of inquiry used by the audience: expression, image, resonance and transport. What was it about the retelling that resonated for them? What images arose while they listened to the retelling? Which expressions had an impact? What was there that moved them to a different place than they had previously been?

Where there is time, a fourth phase of the ceremony is an examination of the process, to situate the comments made in the personal experience of those present. This is deliberately done as a way of "countering the objectification and the marginalisation of people who seek therapy. ...this embodiment of the responses of the reflecting team members counters the possibility that their "truths' might be imposed on people's lives... ".[18]

Definitional ceremonies provide an occasion for acknowledgement or "authentication" of the person(s). Like a reflecting surface, the responses of the witnesses show those at the centre of the consultation/ceremony important developments that could otherwise go unnoticed. They form a representation of what those in the centre give value to and hold precious. They also bring personal interest

16 "Giving affirmations, pointing out positives, congratulatory responses, and so on" are referred to by White as "contemporary practices of applause." White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 165.

17 While I have talked of *witnesses* in the plural, the use of a single outsider witness, or an audience of one for a definitional ceremony, is also effective.

18 Michael White, "Reflecting Teamwork as Definitional Ceremony" in *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays.* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995), 191.

to what the witnesses have heard. These things assist in the thickening and enriching of the alternative story. The group process is based on an understanding of identity as "a public and social achievement, not a private and individual achievement", "shaped by historical and cultural forces rather than by the forces of human nature" and that "a sense of authenticity" regarding the identity so formed, is also derived from a social process.[19]

While our family and social context normally supply the reflective audience for our identity performances through daily interaction, where the personal narrative is being reauthored or where the individual has a sense of not being noticed within a societal context, there may be the need for the deliberate formation of an audience. The same problems that bring people to therapy often isolate them from community. Where they have community connections, those seeking consultation often prefer not to share their vulnerability with their community. These factors make the use of a constructed audience of immense value.

Even when the audience for a definitional ceremony is a deliberately formed and transitory community, its support for the reauthoring work is effective. James Bitter et al write,

> While both Myerhoff and White refer to these "audiences" as artificial, they both note that the term artificial stands in relation to "natural" or "familial" audiences and does not imply dishonest, inauthentic, or second-rate. When "natural" communities for the client are unavailable, artificial communities can be constructed with members of the person's culture in combination with other cultures and still contribute powerful authenticating experiences for the client.[20]

The personal narrative is constructed within and shaped by the socially constructed norms of our communities and culture. A reauthored narrative provides an alternative to a narrative that diminishes or is otherwise problematic, and often contradicts these norms. Under these conditions, White comments:

> ...we found that it was very important to engage an audience that would play a role in verifying these alternative personal narratives. Apart from other things, this contributed to building a sense of solidarity with regard to the values and aspirations for life reflected in

19 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 182.

20 James Robert Bitter et al., "Definitional Ceremonies: Integrating Community into Multicultural Counseling Sessions," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 32(2004): 272.

> these personal narratives. This was highly sustaining in circumstances that could otherwise diminish any story development that might be at odds with what was expected.[21]

This process does not require a pre-existing or continuing relationship. The essential learning from the anthropological observations of Myerhoff and the experience of narrative therapy is that through the process of witnesses reflecting on the identity claims and performances, "people can bring about the very existence they prefer by engaging in a performance of a preferred identity that is 'taken up' by the audience."[22]

Identity projects

Many of those who consult a narrative practitioner will be seeking assistance to find ways to live differently from the way they lived before they stepped through the door of the consulting room. Michael White used the phrase "identity projects" to refer to this orientation toward change. New-comers to the Christian community, those who have returned after some time away, and to a lesser extent those for whom church attendance has been a regular part of their life, may also be pursuing their own identity project, of seeking a different way of living or being.

From the basis of a narrative epistemology, and out of his counselling experience, White suggests a series of investigations that may be helpful to the success of an identity project. These focus on the way people tell the story of their life—their "expressions of life". Those listening may highlight expressions that are linked to identity categories other than the ones being resisted in the identity project. They may be curious about the values and principles that shape these alternative expressions. Their interaction enriches and thickens the story-line of the new identity within the personal narrative. White emphasises that an audience is necessary to support the new direction one is wishing to take.

It may be that the learning that can be gained from the narrative practice of the definitional ceremony is a reminder of the importance of community to our identity project of living within God's grace. The categories of response developed

21 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 179.

22 Ronnie Swartz, "Affirming the "S" in HBSE through the Socio-Cultural Discourses of Lev Vygotsky, Barbara Myerhoff, Jerome Bruner, and Ken Gergen," *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment* 19, no. 7 (2009): 791.

for the definitional ceremony may be modelled within sermons, so that they may become part of the interaction between members of the community. More important, however, is the reminder that in the church we have been given the gift of community. Corporate worship brings us together as a community of support to our individual and group "identity projects".

To some degree we share a world-view, interpret the use of certain words in similar ways, and share some basic assumptions. The church is a community of persons who have been invited to see each other and our world through the eyes of God. Knowing ourselves to be part of the new order, we seek—as a community—to live out the justice of God's reign. While the church itself is subject to the same distortions as all of creation, it provides a community that supports us as we struggle against the oppressive forces in our lives and society. It provides an "audience" as we try to live out our preferred story.

If preaching is "oriented to transformative living and renewed practice"[23] then this community is not just the context of preaching, but that which supports its resolve. Furthermore, in the glimpse this community gives us of the sovereignty of God, it is also that which is preaching's end. The clarity with which we can see Christian community as being counter-cultural is one of the unexpected gifts of a culture where there is an increasing sense of being isolated from each other.

Gail Ramshaw comments,

> Participation in a weekly gathering reminds us that the individual does not, cannot, ought not, exist alone. ... Regular worship enacts the truth that we need one another for life ...
>
> For love to be preeminent, there must be community, for it is other people whom we love. According to the Christian faith, it is the Spirit of the risen Christ who forms the assembly into a body destined for love.[24]

23 Elaine L Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 182.

24 Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in Lectionary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 205, note 3.

Definitional ceremony and spiritual formation

The narrative metaphor encourages us to consider discipleship or Christian spiritual formation in terms of identity formation. While thinking about definitional ceremony may seem like meandering away from the focus on preaching, it draws our attention to the church as God's provision of a socio-cultural context in which we are free to openly "perform" our preferred identity. The reflective surface that is our worshipping community may be highly polished through our sharing in the history, identity and purpose of the community.

Within the discipline of spiritual direction or perhaps more precisely, spiritual formation, a close parallel to the definitional ceremony process could be used. It would be intriguing to participate in a gathering which intentionally listened to an individual or group sharing the story of their relationship with God or their current search for meaning.

The process would begin with the telling. The story told might be an autobiographical account of a lifetime's baptismal journey, a testimony to transformation, or an exploration of the reality of God in one's own life. The topic or content would be chosen by the one(s) telling. Of central importance would be that they felt safe to speak about their faith in that setting.

The categories of response that White suggests for a therapeutic ceremony give a framework readily adapted to exploring such a telling. The questions that those listening ask of themselves to form their response could include: Which of those things said resonate with me? What caught my imagination? Which images did the telling evoke? What did the telling suggest about this person's/these persons' "purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?"[25] What is it about my own life and spiritual journey that accounts for the sense of resonance? Where has the telling taken me that I would not otherwise have gone? How am I different after hearing this story?

Having listened to the reflections of those who witnessed their telling, the one(s) at the centre of the gathering would speak again, using the same set of questions to reflect on what they have heard.

25 White, "Workshop Notes", 14.

By specifically making room to speak about the spiritual dimension of one's life, that aspect of the identity of the person(s) at the centre of the definitional ceremony would be acknowledged and authenticated, not through any "expert" assessment, but by reflection back of their own words. Precious things that might otherwise go unnoticed might be lifted up and given value. Tentative steps towards living one's preferred values would be named, claimed and reinforced.

"Personal" faith

I have observed that, at least here in Australia, faith has become an individualised experience. We hesitate to speak about it for fear of offending another's sensibilities or exposing our own vulnerabilities. In some ways the sermon reinforces this: while gathered as community, our silence and body orientation isolate us from each other as we sit and listen. Our reactions to the Scripture that is read and the words that are preached generally remain in the privacy of our own thoughts.[26] However, personal identity is not a private project, but a dialogical practice that requires an audience.[27] The construction of our identity as a child of God therefore emerges most readily where we have witnesses to our efforts towards that identity.

There is a growing number of congregations that invite their young people to write and present a personal statement of faith to the congregation as part of their Confirmation celebration. While the response of the congregation may be one of pride, the formational impact on the young person is potentially more important.

Small group Bible Study or discussion groups address to some degree the necessity of an audience to our identity project.[28] A small group or cell group is of a size that enables each individual to contribute to conversation, and by its definitional focus on Bible Study or aspects of Christian living, there is the opportunity for members to rehearse their Christian identity. Tom Long put it this way:

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26 Even the "call and response" of the African-American sermon tends to be a ritual or stylised response rather than a reflective one.

27 Jerome Bruner, "The Autobiographical Procress," *Current Sociology* 43, no. 2/3 (1995): 161.

28 Small groups were the central approach of the Church Growth movement of the late 70s and early 80s. See, for example, J N Vaughan, *The World's Twenty Largest Churches: Small Group Growth Principles in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984) and C Peter Wagner, ed., with Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: The State of the Art*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986).

> The most effective Bible study groups ... allow for a free flow of honest conversation, questioning, probing, exploration, and even skepticism, because it is the experience of such groups that putting ideas into words in dialogue with others is an important aspect of how we come to know and believe the wisdom of the Scripture. When we talk about our faith, we are not merely expressing our beliefs; we are coming more fully and clearly to believe.[29]

Church growth principles name relationships as central to retaining new members in the church community. It may seem logical to attribute this to the "natural" desire for friendship, and to a propensity not to want to disappoint friends by failing to go to those occasions of worship that provide the venue for social interaction. From a narrative perspective, however, new members may be considered people who are pursuing an identity project—that of becoming an active Christian. If their project is supported through interaction with others, and the opportunity exists to make identity claims within a supportive context, it is more likely to be successful.

Testimony

Preaching is a privileged activity. It is evident, when seen through the lens of the narrative metaphor, that the responses of those who listen to preaching will have an impact on the personal narrative of the preacher. Even if direct comment on a sermon is rare and generally concise, the interaction with those who listen provides opportunity for both the story of identity as one who preaches, and the meaning found within the narrative, to be thickened and enriched. This is one way of understanding the encouragement that Charles Rice gives to preachers, to make "vital connections with an active community that can stimulate, direct, and sustain the preacher."[30]

Long summarises:

> We talk our way *toward* belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, more deeply. Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction.... So it is that trying to put our faith into words is a part of discovering what we know about God, believe about God, and trust about God.[31]

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29 Thomas G Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 7.

30 Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, 16.

31 Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, 6.

While it is essential that the one set aside to lead reflection on the community's story is sustained for this task, the potential role of outsider witnesses to Christian identity formation leads me to wonder about ways to extend this to more members of the community within the worship context. I previously referred to the work of John McClure regarding a systematic process of including other voices in sermon preparation.[32] The key intention of the round table conversations about the texts is to bring a broader range of interpretations, experiences and seen implications of the gospel into the pulpit, and thereby develop collaborative congregational leadership. The conversations would also support the identity formation of those who participate, as others in the group respond to their personal reflections. This gives additional reason to incorporate this practice into the community life of the congregation.

A further means of providing an audience to the Christian identity claims of a broader section of the congregation is through the use of testimony in worship settings. Testimonial presentations are not traditionally part of the worship within my own denomination. In Australia there is increasing diversity of practice; however, the majority of congregations follow a traditional liturgical framework, whether with older sung liturgies and hymns or more contemporary compositions. The sermon and the Prayer of the Church, and perhaps some kind of presentation to the children, will generally be the only unscripted elements of worship. While comments from church leaders about the use of testimony would probably refer to the necessity that the focus of worship remain on God and God's word, rather than on people, there is honesty in this response made to a blog regarding evangelism:

> Lutherans know that having testimonies is not part of the way that Lutherans worship. Other denominations do that at worship. Most Lutherans aren't sure that evangelism is part of their denominational identity and fore-grounding it in a "foreign" practice may only serve to underscore that in ways that you really don't want to do. [33]

The authors of both the comment and the original blog are pastors of Lutheran churches in the USA, but the comment could easily have come from Australia. Those congregations that have adopted a more evangelical style of

32 John S McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 7-8.

33 http://lutherpunk.wordpress.com/2010/09/22/why-we-suck-at-evangelism-5-theses-for-consideration/ accessed 4/1/2011.

worship may include occasional testimonial presentations from their laity, which only adds to the sense that "they're not quite Lutheran." Presumably in response to concerns raised regarding the practice, the Lutheran Church of Australia's Commission on Theology and Inter-church Relations prepared a document to give guidance to the use of testimony in public worship. After introductory cautionary comments and contextual material, it suggests a number of places within the liturgical framework where testimony might support the liturgical action.[34]

The experience of narrative practice demonstrates that encouraging the public performance of preferred identity claims assists in bringing about that identity. As I reflect on the practices of some of those Christian sub-cultures (including my own) where spoken testimony is alien, I can see that inclusion in ritual leadership is another form of performance of a preferred identity that allows for its authentication. When children or new members are invited to share in the serving of communion, for example–either in the formal role of acolyte or the more informal serving roles of other contexts–they are making a non-verbal public statement about their place in that community. The non-verbal response of the community reinforces (or denies) the identity claim being made.

Collective identity

Just as individual identity can be viewed as a discursive construct, so too can organisational identity. A group of people—even one made up of people from within a culture where identity is highly individualised—will have its own narrative from which identity and meaning is derived. Jerome Bruner and Carol Feldman muse,

> It would seem that any group that wants to constitute itself as a lasting or important one has to develop shared stories that not only define the group's identity, but also provide a means whereby individual members can guide their own discovery of meaning in their own lives. If people are to go beyond what merely happened to what it meant to them, they need to share stylized genres of story, poetry, oratory, and history to mark their shared meanings off from the quotidian banalities of everyday life and talk.[35]

34 Lutheran Church of Australia Commission on Theology and Interchurch Relations, "The Use of Personal Testimonies in Public Worship", (Adelaide: LCA, 2001).

35 Jerome Bruner and Carol Fleisher Feldman, "Group Narrative as a Cultural Context of Autobiography," in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C Rubin (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 295.

Going beyond the interaction of the group narrative and group identity into the arena of deliberative action, Stanley Hauerwas defines a "community [as] a group of persons who share a history and whose common set of interpretations about that history provide the basis for common actions."[36] Just as the personal narrative not only carries meaning and identity, but provides a script for living, so, too, the collective narrative provides a framework for our performance.

Tim Shapiro observes,

> Congregations live by one or more sacred stories. The sacred story will, with varying degrees of awareness in the congregation, influence congregational life. ...In addition, complementary and contradictory sacred stories can influence practice. ...What makes a story sacred for a congregation is its subterranean power to influence the practice of the faith community.[37]

The third side of the interactive triangle between narrative, meaning and action is rendered more visible by Hauerwas' declaration that "the meaning of Christian faith can be known only through discovering the implications of that faith for how Christians live their lives."[38]

In the tradition of Arendt and Ricoeur, he sees narrative as the vehicle for carrying history, identity and purpose and therefore claims that the community exists only to the extent that the shared story is developed. Sharon Welch comments, "The most powerful forms of community in the United States today are communities shaped by a single, coherent narrative: the Christian Right ... and those advocating a single global culture of technological innovation and consumerism."[39]

The application of a narrative epistemology that has been spelt out in this study, however, leaves room for considerable diversity of both story and practice within a community. In a parallel manner to personal identity as constituted by the personal narrative, "collective identities [are] multi-voiced, quasi-fictional, plurivocal and reflexive constructions that unfold over time and are embedded in

36 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 60.

37 Tim Shapiro, "The Sacred Value of Congregational Stories," in *Living Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture*, ed. Larry A Golemon (Herndon, VA: Alban Insitute, 2010), 94.

38 Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology*, Suny Series, Religion and American Public Life (New York: State University of New York, 2004), 126.

39 Sharon Welch, "Communitarian Ethics after Hauerwas," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 10(1997): 83.

broader discursive (cultural) practices."[40] The individuals that are members of an organisation bring not only as many interpretations of the collective narrative as there are individuals, but individuals bring differing interpretations at different times and in different contexts.

Joseph Maxwell proposes a model for community solidarity based on contiguity rather than similarity.

> Similarity-based solidarity derives from the ways in which people recognize or construct *resemblances* between one another, ways in which they are alike. Contiguity-based solidarity, on the other hand, derives from the ways in which people *interact*, meet one another's needs, and thereby come to know and care about one another.[41]

A group whose communal narrative is built around being and working together is able to incorporate embracing diversity into its values, whereas a group whose narrative is built on similarity is threatened by it.

In any organisation or collective there will be individuals and subgroups who attempt to define the narrative for the group. Rather than embracing the diversity, they attempt to impose a single coherent story thread as the account of the organisation. Story lines in the narrative carry a version of reality, so asserting power over the collective narrative this way is an exercise of social control. Andrew Brown gives this summary:

> In a Foucauldian (1977) sense, narratives are a form of discursive practice that does not merely provide the contextual apparatus for the exercise of power over those in organizations, but functions as a disciplinary form that constitutes organizations and their participants in particular ways.[42]

He goes on to cite this quotation from Stewart Clegg: "To the extent that meanings become fixed or reified in certain forms, which then articulate particular practices, agents and relations, this fixity is power."

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40 Andrew D Brown, "A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities," *Journal of Management Studies* 43, no. 4 (2006): 732, citing Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage, 1977).

41 Joseph A Maxwell, "Diversity, Solidarity, and Community," in *Presented to the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (New Orleans, LA: Unpublished. Copyright 1996 Joseph A Maxwell, 1994), 4.

42 Brown, "A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities," 736.

As part of the distortion that is inherent in so much that we do, abuses of power do occur within the community. Rather than being supportive, the community or significant power holders within it can rest their normalising gaze on fellow believers. Rather than being inclusive, the community can exclude individuals and subgroups from membership or activity. When one part of the body of Christ is excluded or discomforted, the whole body is diseased. My own denomination does not ordain women, something I feel keenly. A 2008 consultation of the Lutheran World Federation Department of Theology and Studies declared,

> We view the ordination of women not primarily as a societal or women's issue but as a matter that goes to the heart of what it means to be the church. The church's witness to God's reconciliation and freedom in Christ is compromised when women are excluded from being able to serve as public witnesses to this by proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments.[43]

This brings the discussion back to the role of the preacher. The preacher is generally charged with providing theological leadership, and is the one whose voice is privileged within the congregation. It seems logical that included in the role of the preacher is the eliciting, sorting out, and giving voice to otherwise unheard stories. Like the societal grand-narratives, collective narratives dominated by strong individuals or factions silence the voices from the margins. When these are brought into the centre, there is no room for exclusionary practice or normalising judgement.

A thin account of one's life limits the choices an individual can see, which can lead to a problem saturated life and narrative. So, also, a thin collective narrative is likely to be problematic, particularly when challenges arise that are not covered by the collective narrative. The collective narrative may be enriched and thickened by paying attention to the stories from the margins, and being curious about and teasing out the narrative strands that are visible.

This raises questions about how to provide leadership to congregations: how do leaders take seriously the charge given to them to lead, without dominating the collective narrative; and how does our concern for those at the margins modify our thinking about the role of charismatic, "natural" or motivational leaders in determining congregational direction? It would be a distraction within this study to

43 www.lutheranworld.org/What_we_do/DTS/DTS-Documents/DTS-Ongoing_Reformation-2008.pdf, accessed 20/5/2009

explore these questions, but it is important to acknowledge that these questions and others arise when exploring the concept of a collective narrative.[44]

A major contribution of the conceptualising organisations or groups within the framework of the narrative metaphor is the capacity of the collective narrative to hold together disparate threads in a story, and the partial perspectives and multiple interpretations that individuals and subgroups will have regarding their life together. Mary Doak, in her introduction to a work exploring the development of a public theology, suggests that narrative has a special role for that purpose because "narrative is the form in which historical identity and direction are imagined, and because narratives comprise a whole out of particular events and characters without denying their individuality."[45]

The interaction between the individual personal narrative and the communal narrative is an iterative one. Bruner and Feldman write

> While virtually any culturally shared narrative form that can be used to interpret stories can be used for constructing a communicable social self, there is... a need of "sharing" one's autobiography with the groups one interacts with on a face-to-face basis. The story of a life, when all is said and done, must be shared with one's "miniculture," with the proximal group(s) on which one's cultural existence depends. ...What is plain is that the accounts given by individuals constitute, in some important sense, the group's identity. Yet at the same time, a group's identity also constitutes the identities of its members. A self account is used for interpreting shared events of its group members'

44 In 2005, The Alban Institute embarked upon a project on narrative leadership. Its conclusions resonate with this work on preaching, and are explored in the Institute's Narrative Leadership publications edited by Larry A Golemon.

The "key findings" of the Narrative Leadership project included:

"3. Local stories from any religious context can be redemptive as they bring about change in the personal lives, common life, and the community mission of a congregation.

4. Religious leaders who coordinate the power of stories to bring about inner change in people—their sense of identity and purpose, and outer change in their congregation—both in "practice" and mission to the world, are most effective as story-leaders.

5. Effective narrative work helps leaders move congregations out of "stuck" or paralyzing stories of their past into new possibilities for the future.

6. Intentional use of narrative frameworks and practice can transform the work of an institution by focusing bringing community practice and purpose into a powerful alliance.

7. Narrative approaches to ministry help local communities of faith claim their "place" in a fast-changing world, by rebuilding their own traditions to re-engage that world anew." http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=6174, accessed 5/2/2011.

45 Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology*, 12.

> lives, and contributes to constituting each of them as a social self *within the group.*[46]

This brings us full circle to the earlier comments on the need for social interaction as part of identity formation. The implication for Christian identity formation is clear: we need each other, and the story we share together.

If the personal narrative is the vehicle for identity, its fluid and interactive nature implies that identity is always evolving. The narrative metaphor also suggests that the collective identity of the church is continually evolving: the church is always in a state of becoming. While it is grounded in the Biblical record we have of God's interaction with the world, as we tell and retell our story, it is constantly being constructed and renewed.

The church, therefore, has a proleptic existence. Just as the transcendental reign of God has a now-but-not-yet quality, despite the present reality of God's grace, so does the church. We are the body of Christ, but that harmonious unity eludes us. Some in the church see all change as progress, and therefore positive. Some critics believe that change itself is necessarily bad, and their call to the church for renewed faithfulness is a call to return to traditions, exegeses and values of the past. Just as the unfolding of the life of an individual can take positive or negative directions (and it will not always be immediately apparent if a change is in one direction or another), so it is with the life of the church.

The narrative practitioner has a responsibility towards "identifying and addressing the real effects or consequences of one's actions in the lives of others,"[47] as they support those consulting them in their attempts to make meaning of their lives, and in their identity projects. All those privileged with leading the church, including its preachers, have a responsibility to identify and address the real effects or consequences of their words and actions, as they support the community in its attempt to make meaning in its life together, and in its identity project. I believe this is faithfully done when (doubly) listening to the community, and leading it always to reflect theologically on its life together.

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46 Bruner and Feldman, "Group Narrative as a Cultural Context of Autobiography," 293-4.

47 Michael White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000), 150.

The finest example I have heard of leadership through preaching, at a time of crisis for a church, is that of Bishop Mark Hanson at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That body had just passed a motion permitting the ordained ministry of persons "in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships." Drawing on his experience as a parish pastor, Hanson referred to the situation of a family or group who had experienced loss, and how into that situation he might read the final words of Romans 8, and read them to the assembled. He then spoke of a family or group who for the first time might feel affirmed about their place in the wider community, and read words about reconciliation from Ephesians 2. Still speaking about a "hypothetical" situation, he went on to "imagine" that the family or groups already referred to were gathered in one place, together with some who were concerned about the ramifications of their own decision-making, and read a passage from Colossians 3.

Finally, he concluded with the reminder that "we are all called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, remembering again and again that we are called into the one body. ...[W]hat is absolutely important for me is that we have this conversation together." At a time of potential turmoil and certain change, this leader called the assembled people to focus on what it means to be church.

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Pastoral Response Following the Ministry Policies Decision

Made to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson August 21, 2009

After the ministry policies vote on Friday evening, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson delivered the following message:

I want to share some words. As one you have called to serve as pastor of this church, I have been standing here thinking about my 23 years as a parish pastor and how differently I would go into various contexts. Gathering with a family or a group of people who had just experienced loss, or who perhaps were wondering if they still belonged, or in fact felt deeply that ones to whom they belong had been severed from them, I would probably turn to words such as Romans 8:

> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? [. . .] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34–35, 38–39).

But then I thought, what if I were going into a family, a group, or a community that had always wondered if they belonged, and suddenly now had received a clear affirmation that they belonged? All of the wondering about the dividing walls and feelings of separation seem to have dropped away. That would be a very different conversation. I would probably read to them out of Ephesians:

> But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, [. . .] In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:13–14, 21–22).

But then I thought, what if those two groups were together, but also in their midst were those who had neither experienced loss nor the feeling of the dividing wall of separation coming down, but were worried whether all that had occurred might sever the unity that is ours in Christ, and might be wondering if their actions might have contributed to reconciliation or separation? If all those people were together in a room, I would read from Colossians:

> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:12–17).

That passage gives invitation and expectation that those deeply disappointed today will have the expectation and the freedom to continue to admonish and to teach in this church. And so, too, those who have experienced reconciliation today are called to humility. You are called to clothe yourselves with love. But we are all called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, remembering again and again that we are called in the one body. I will invite you tomorrow afternoon into important, thoughtful, prayerful conversations about what all of this means for our life together. But what is absolutely important for me is that we have the conversation together.

I ended my oral report with these words: "We finally meet one another not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."

Let us pray. Oh, God, gracious and holy, mysterious and merciful, we meet this day at the foot of the cross, and there we kneel in gratitude and awe that you have loved us so much that you would give the life of your son so that we might have life in his name. Send your Spirit this night, the Spirit of the risen Christ that has been breathed into us. May it calm us. May your Spirit unite us. May it continue to gather us. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

Fig 2: Pastoral Remarks by Presiding Bishop Mark S Hanson[48]

Earlier in this chapter I stated that for a reauthored narrative to be resilient for the present and future, it needed to be anchored in the past. Our identity is constructed in interaction with our past experience, and without a history a new

48 www.elca.org/~/media/Files/CWA09/PB%20Pastoral%20Remarks%20Final.pdf, accessed 5/9/2010.

story—disconnected from previous meanings—cannot survive. Scripture is both a guide for the church and our community's history. When Hanson recalled scriptural passages to call the 2009 Churchwide Assembly to continue journeying together, he was assisting the gathering to contextualise the change that was occurring. He linked the current situation to the past, facilitating continuity in the making of meaning.

Re-membering

Jared Alcántara began a conference presentation regarding the use of time in African American preaching by refuting Zarathustra:

> Time does run backward. Usually, it runs forward but, on some occasions, it moves backward, sideways, and even stops. At least, practices in African American preaching seem to indicate that it does. In this context, time is fluid and flexible. It bends and breaks. It thickens or collapses. It is malleable.[49]

As the Body of Christ we have privileged access to sacred time, feasting alongside our ancestors and descendants in the faith, and living a proleptic existence where the future is our present. Part of contextualising a reauthored story will be embracing this fluidity of time.

One contextualising emphasis in narrative practice will be on links to people from the history of the story. This follows from its social-constructionist foundation. Re-membering is the word used by Myerhoff to name an "active, purposive unification with figures that belong to one's life story, as contrasted with passive reminiscence."[50] In narrative therapy *Re-membering* is a process of inquiry used to enhance the resilience of the reauthored story. White comments,

> Re-membering conversations are shaped by the conception that identity is founded upon an "association of life" rather than a core self. This association of life has a membership composed of the significant figures and identities of a person's past, present and projected future, whose voices are influential with regard to the construction of the person's identity.[51]

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49 Jared E Alcántara, "Were You There?: The Uses of Sacred Time in Conversation with African American Preaching," in *Academy of Homiletics 2010 Annual Meeting: "The Call to Preach"* (Atlanta, GA), 10.

50 Bobbi Rood, "A Time to Talk: Re-Membering Conversations with Elders," International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, no. 1 (2009): 28 (note 2).

51 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 129.

Re-membering conversations aim to engage significant figures from one's past or present in supporting the directions one is seeking to follow. It may be more appropriate to use the term *figure* rather than *person* in relation to Re-membering, as significant things other than human can also be part of this process. So, also, can figures that are not personally known to those whose narrative is being reauthored, but who may be role models or heroes. The non-human other is anthropomorphised in the inquiry. Re-membrance of a much-loved teddybear, cartoon character or family pet may strengthen the reauthoring of the personal narrative.

The re-membering inquiry will include questions regarding the figure's contribution to the life of the one seeking assistance and the identity of the person through the eyes of the figure. The style of questioning then turns 180 degrees, with questions regarding the contribution of the one at the centre of the inquiry, to the life of the significant figure. The questions relate to how this contribution may have shaped or had the potential to shape the identity of the figure or their purposes in life.[52] It is this narrative turn that differentiates the conversation from reminiscence. The inquiry is not so much about the figure, but about the interaction or possible interaction, that will include this figure in the social construction of the new story.

White recounts his interaction with "Jessica" to illustrate the value of re-membering. In response to some questions about how hope was sustained during a childhood of parental abuse, Jessica recalled a neighbour who provided nurture for her. White asked questions regarding Jessica's understanding of why the neighbour might have done that, including

> "What could it be that she appreciated about you that your parents seemed oblivious to?" ...
>
> In response to these questions, Jessica began to voice some very different understandings about herself that included positive conclusions about her own worth. ...[53]

White then shifted the focus to questions regarding Jessica's contribution to the life of her neighbour.

> This reflection was aided by questions about how Jessica's contribution might have affected the neighbour's sense of who she

52 Ibid., 139.

53 Ibid., 131.

> was and of her sense of purpose, about how this might have validated and reinforced the purposes and values that this neighbour treasured, and about how this might have enriched the neighbour's understanding of what her life was about...
>
> This conversation had been a turning point around which the highly negative conclusions that [Jessica] had held about her own identity were eroded and displaced by more positive contributions. From this point on Jessica gradually became less vulnerable to the critical understandings that she had held about her own life and that had been overwhelming her.[54]

Speaking of this aspect of the therapeutic journey with troubled adolescents, Michael Ungar says, "What started as a new story about the present, and then grew into a new-old story about the past, now becomes a story of resilience that predicts a different future from that previously anticipated."[55]

For the individual, through re-membering, "life is given a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future."[56] The principles can be applied to working with a congregation. For example, typical of older, conservative congregations is recalling the faith and struggle of those that established the congregation. A re-membering approach to this resource would be to wonder what those who founded the church think about how the congregation has managed their recent struggle. It's a way of calling on figures from the past to enhance agency, rather than holding them up as models.

The "cloud of witnesses"[57] that is the church of the past, present and future, is also a part of the socio-cultural context of our personal narrative, and specifically those strands concerning our Christian identity. Unlike a "heroes of faith" approach, which can feel distant and even disempowering, to raise questions of relationship and agency is to strengthen the connections of these persons in the chosen associations of life.

Re-membering investigations are oriented to creating the space for people to more richly incorporate the continuing presence of significant others in their

54 Ibid., 132.

55 Michael T Ungar, "Constructing Narratives of Resilience with High-Risk Youth," *Journal of Systematic Therapies* 20, no. 2 (2001): 69.

56 Barbara Myerhoff, "Life History among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Remembering," in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspective in Anthropology*, ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 111.

57 Heb 12:1

narrative, and therefore in the way they negotiate life and identity. Assisting grieving people to remain in relationship with the one they have lost, through conversation, or the funeral sermon or eulogy, is one specific application of this practice. In the community setting of the funeral, particularly, acknowledgement of the importance of, and the continuing nature of, one's relationship with the deceased occurs surrounded by people from the various communities within which the relationship was exercised during life.

It is only a small jump to see the application of re-membering practices to exploring our continuing relationship with the present but unseen Christ. The church community provides a tangible audience to living out of each member's relationship with the living Christ.

Ritual

In the corporate worship of the congregation, rituals bring past and present together, as we celebrate as the *children of Israel* or the *body of Christ*.

> "My father was a wandering Aramean."[58]
>
> "Take and eat, this is my body."[59]

The past becomes part of our experience and links us strongly to our forebears in faith. Stephen Connor suggests that one definition of post-modernism is "the condition in which ... the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present's disposal."[60] There is the sense of a long or enduring present. Judeo-Christianity could, by this definition, be conceived as post-modern from pre-modernity. As we draw the reality of the past into the reality of our present, our engagement with the sacred text also thickens and enriches the metaphors that we hold in common as Christian community, so that symbolic layers are available for individuals and the community to access.

> Elna Mouton reminds us that in the early church,
>
> the worship service was the primary context where believers were continuously *constituted* and *affirmed as a community of believers,* as

58 Dt 26:5, used to introduce the Exodus story as told during the Passover Seder.

59 Mt 26:26, spoken as part of the liturgy of the Eucharist.

60 Steven Connor (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

> the "household of God". It was the primary location where a collective identity would be assigned to them, where they learned to know who they were and Whose they were. This is where they would learn to dream about God's eschatological future, which had already become a reality in Christ, and from where they were sent forth to care for one another and the world.[61]

Clearly, much of the liturgical life of the Christian community is in the style of Re-membering. Prayers and liturgical responses often include bringing into the present and personalising references to elements of the Scripture. For example, part of the Eucharistic Prayer written by Nathan Nettlebeck for the Sunday following the week in which I am writing this section, is as follows:

> In your child, Jesus,
> your divine nature has indwelt humanity.
> Nailed to the cross, he cancelled the record of our sin,
> and when we were buried with him in baptism,
> you raised us with him
> through faith in your active power.
> Now to all who seek and ask,
> you give the gift of life,
> holding us together in Christ's body,
> nourishing us daily with the bread of life
> and calling us "Children of the living God."[62]

Together with the regular account of Jesus death and resurrection, Jesus' words from the Gospel lesson, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find" are drawn into the prayer. Those participating in the liturgy are the ones seeking and asking, and in return, receiving the gift of life. They are also nourished "with the bread of life" which echoes the image used in the pericope of the heavenly Father as the one who will respond to persistent requests for bread at midnight (Luke 11:1-13). Jesus' words from an ancient text are appropriated to the present.

In Chapter Three I referred to Gail Ramshaw's book *Treasures Old and New: Images in Lectionary* which explores the symbolic power of Biblical images. In her opening chapter on the lectionary, she states that the central purpose of the reading of

61 Elna Mouton, "Transmitting Hope in the New Testament," in *Preaching as a Language of Hope*, ed. Cas J A Vos, Lucy L Hogan, and Johan H Cilliers. (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007), 79.

62 Nathan Nettleton, "Eucharistic Preface, Year C Proper 12" LaughingBird.net, 2001 http://www.laughingbird.net/ComingWeeks.html, accessed 19/07/2010. "Children of the living God" is quoting the Hebrew Bible reading for the day.

Scripture is "to hear the saving voice of God for all."[63] In this, Re-membering occurs:

> The scripture reading brings the Word who is Christ into our midst. Christ spoke not only in the past, but speaks also here, in this assembly. We do not go back into history, to some holy time in the first century. Rather, the Spirit of God whom the church encounters in Jesus is now in this very room, and we stand to honor that presence of Christ.[64]

The belief in an eternal and truly present Christ can, in the mystery of faith, sit side-by-side with the concept of recalling the significance of the person Jesus to the lives of those listening. In the recall that they are "more valuable than many sparrows,"[65] the relationship can contribute to shaping and claiming the person one seeks to be, and living out one's life preferences.

> If Christ is not born within the community, it does not much matter that Christ was born long ago; faith is not about accepting facts of ancient history, but about a transformation of ourselves and the world in our contemporary experience.[66]

In the previous chapter Barbara Lundblad was quoted as suggesting ways of "respectful, creative braiding of the old and new."[67] The insights of narrative practice give us a way to understand the power of this braiding. Incorporating liturgical responses from Scriptural texts that support a challenging sermon is not to lull people into a sense of security or to counterbalance a sense that all that is known and familiar are being challenged. It is, rather, to assist them to recall that the values and beliefs on which the sermon is based have been part of the Christian story from its beginning. By grounding the new understandings in their past—highlighting their history—the alternative story line is thickened, rooted in its history, and therefore made more resilient.

Whatever philosophy or analysis we use to try to understand what we do as the people of God, and how to do it better, there is one thing that remains central: as a church, all that we do arises from and leads back to worship. Those who are called

63 Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in Lectionary*, 12.

64 Ibid., 11.

65 Mt 10:30

66 Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in Lectionary*, 23.

67 Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 80.

to preach do so in response to God's grace, and effective preaching is first and foremost an encounter with the living God. This encounter is part of a bigger whole, nested within the liturgy, the *work of the people*. As Charles Rice says,

> There is simply the need for the sermon to go somewhere in the community, to issue in an event that involves the people in their own apprehension and articulation of the gospel. In more traditional liturgies the first act following the sermon is the creed, a time for all to stand up and declare their faith. Also the prayers, when they follow the sermon, provide a similar opportunity for the people to do their own work in the light of the sermon, to carry forward the liturgy—including the sermon—to its conclusion, a corporate experience of the presence of Christ.[68]

The space and time and framework of worship provide a place for us to act out our common commitment. The rituals of our worship of God provide ways of marking and affirming our own journey like the *definitional ceremonies* of narrative practice. In worship we claim our baptismal identity.

At conferences and other gatherings of narrative practitioners, rituals are enacted. To one who has been immersed in the liturgy of the faithful, the lack of shared history and symbolic structure that we benefit from in Christian worship means these rituals seem shallow. However, rather than our having nothing to learn from narrative practice regarding liturgy, the emergence of these ritual practices within that community reminds us of the rich resource we have in the traditions of the church, and gives another way to think about it.

Ramshaw summarises the role of ritual practice, saying,

> By ritualizing their faith, Christians come to embody their values. To ritualize something is to practice its intent. When a community gather for ritual ... the assembly is held together in actions that propose a worldview worthwhile for the individual and the group ... however, worshipping with the community strengthens one's resolve to believe, because in the ritual, the Christian world view is enacted.[69]

Nowhere is this seen as clearly as when the congregation gathers around the table, affirming the presence of Christ in their midst, and giving thanks and praise to God. The liturgy leads us to remember that we gather with the church across time and place, with those who have gone before us and those who are yet to come. The

68 Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, 23.

69 Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in Lectionary*, 204.

remembering/anamnesis enlivens within us the continuing relationship with the living God, as we celebrate our hope and vision of a new reality. So we live out the re-authored story of our Christian identity, before we leave that place to live it out in the wider socio-cultural context of our existence.

The spaces we create for worship are also part of the expression of our narrative. In her ethnographic work at the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center, in addition to the definitional ceremonial performance of identity for an immediate audience, Myerhoff noticed that "people inscribed their self-interpretation on the spaces and surfaces they touched—walls, neighbourhoods, media ..."[70]. While many worship spaces are formal, designed by generations past and controlled by the lethargy of committees, the way that flowers are arranged, or vessels set out on the altar are part of the self-interpretation by the one doing the placement. And the changeable things like the use of artwork and banners, or the tidiness of the sanctuary, or the presence or absence of toys are all part of performing the collective narrative of the community.

The socio-cultural context of preaching

In this chapter we have explored something of the role of the context of the sermon. A sermon is preached to a gathered community and is embraced within the liturgy. The gathered community provides a socio-cultural context for the Christian identity projects of its members. Ideally, through our participation in the community of support that is the church, we will have an audience for our intentions and dreams—one that supports our choices and the directions in which we wish to walk.

The implications for preaching arise from this orientation. The success of any re-authoring or identity project will be strengthened when the links between the newly structured material and older strands of the narrative on which it is built are clear. When the preacher can make explicit the links with long held values and with figures from the past, and project current concerns and learning into the future through the hope reflected in the narrative, the reauthored narrative becomes resilient. It is more likely to persist when nested into the relationships of the community and its discourse. In encouraging the interaction of the community, its leaders will model ways of interacting that open options for each other, rather than

70 Myerhoff, ""Life Not Death in Venice": Its Second Life," 266.

close them. Testimonial conversations enrich and thicken Christian identity, particularly when accompanied by opportunity for reflective responses.

Narratives have room to embrace diversity and disparate threads of a story. So, too, the church community can develop an identity based on contiguity rather than similarity, in its identity project of being welcoming and inclusive. The things we hold in common may not be the outward expressions of our faith, or our interpretations of it, but the core hope to which we are called.

In the gift of the church, we have been given the socio-cultural context for our relationship with God. When we enact ritual, we are rehearsing that relationship, and alongside the worship we offer, receive nurture for living out our Christian identity in the broader world. Through the community we may be enabled to see each other through the eyes of Christ, and to grow together towards being the inclusive, justice-making community we seek to be.

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CHAPTER SIX

TEACHING PREACHING

I am always doing things I can't do. That's how I get to do them.
Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

Formation of a preacher

Christine Smith writes, in the opening paragraphs of her chapter in *Purposes of Preaching*:

> Those of us who teach craft urge students to learn how to craft their sermons in ways that invite individuals and whole communities into experiences, into meaning, into truth, into holy encounters that will leave people nourished and changed. Today we no longer hope preaching will be engaging and experiential for preacher and congregation alike; we *expect* this to be true, and we strive for this reality.[1]

In my introductory chapter, I ask whether it is possible to teach how to preach effective sermons, sermons which, in Smith's words, are "holy encounters that will leave people nourished and changed." In the same volume as the quote above, Paul Scott Wilson, who has taught homiletics for many years, relates a conversation with the similarly experienced Ronald Allen:

> Neither of us has done research to determine the best way to teach homiletics. Neither of us has been able to determine an effective tool to do so. We might interview and test students on their homiletical competence and knowledge as they depart from seminary, and again at five and ten years out. Still, how would we test homiletical competence? How would we identify the best sermons? ... How would we avoid assessing personalities?[2]

He then calls on the homiletic guild to continue to examine the questions regarding how to assist preachers to learn their craft. His chapter concludes,

> Perhaps every age must learn to preach all over again. What one age knows instinctively, another must strain to understand or put into

1 Christine Smith, "Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-Membering, and Right Relations," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 91.

2 Paul Scott Wilson, "Preaching as a Theological Venture," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 152.

> practice. I once hoped to have answers to most of my homiletical questions, but I find new ones that demand new solutions ...[3]

Donald Schön developed his concept of the *reflective practitioner* in response to what he termed as "a crisis of confidence in professional knowledge." He relates conversations with professionals that have seriously considered the evolving intricacies of their chosen field alongside its standard knowledge base.

> On the whole, their assessment is that professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of professional practice—the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice.[4]

He explores the "intuitive artistry" of excellent practitioners for clues regarding how to learn flexible, adaptive professional practice. His initial suggestion is that this artistry is "not invariant, known and teachable," but that it "appears, nonetheless, at least for some individuals, to be learnable".[5]

There are many who believe that excellence in preaching is an innate ability rather than something that has been taught.[6] Despite this attitude, professors of homiletics are constantly seeking more effective ways to assist students as they learn to preach. They are informed by the evolving body of educational theory, drawing on participative inquiry, attending to integration between theory and practice, and committed to collaboration, to a pedagogy that is both humanising and socialising, to building the learning community, to teachers as co-learners.

In the previous chapters I have explored various implications of a narrative epistemology in regard to the art and context of preaching. A framework derived from the narrative metaphor can integrate much that is understood about effective preaching, including ideas regarding reflective practice. This chapter turns to concepts drawn from within a narrative epistemology for the teaching of preaching.

The central metaphor of a narrative epistemology is that we draw our identity from and make meaning in our lives by the story we tell ourselves about our life. A

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3 Ibid., 156.

4 Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 14.

5 Ibid., 18.

6 Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson, Preaching and Its Partners (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 1.

teaching process that is congruent with this central idea is one that will encourage the development of identity as preacher through exploration and development of the story lines regarding that identity, and more fully, identity as pastor or minister. Alongside a curriculum designed for the acquisition of skill, it will pay attention to a process which takes seriously the notion of identity being formed in a social and cultural context, and the values and commitments that have developed within this social and cultural context.

This broader context for learning is acknowledged at the beginning of almost every book on preaching. Family, colleagues, and congregations are often thanked for their contribution to the development of the author, as a preacher. Barbara Lundblad, for example, writes

> I am deeply grateful to the members of Our Saviour's Atonement Lutheran Church in New York City, who taught me most of what I know about preaching. Their lively engagement with lectionary texts over shared meals and their honest responses to seventeen years of sermons transformed the way I understand preaching and listening.[7]

As one project within an extensive survey of people's experience of preaching, a team funded by the Lilly Endowment interviewed thirty-two ministers on how they had learned to preach. Most of them referred to listening to the sermons of other preachers, particularly as they were growing up. While seminary study was seen as laying a theoretical or theological foundation under their preaching, most understood their development as preachers as the result of regularly preaching and receiving feedback on that preaching.[8]

The formation of a preacher is a life-long process. There are, however, times of concentration on the task. The years spent in theological education, particularly if integrated with the candidacy processes of a denomination, are generally understood to be pivotal to pastoral formation. Alongside the academic preparation, there is often an expectation that the personal use of spiritual practices, shared worship life, and the shared broader life of the community will contribute to pastoral formation. Many seminaries have embraced pedagogical ideas that emphasise integrated,

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7 Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 9-10.

8 Ronald J Allen, "How Do Some Ministers Learn to Preach?" (paper presented at the 39th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, "Prophetic Preaching", Memphis, TN, 2004), 162.

collaborative and transformational learning. These aim to enable the creation of meaning together with the development of values and skills, where past experience provides the foundation for the growth of competence. This fits seamlessly with a narrative approach.

The identity project of becoming a preacher is a specific part of pastoral formation. The metaphors used to describe pastoral formation reveal the philosophical or anthropological bases that are the foundation for the metaphor. An essentialist image might be one of sculpting to remove debris that covers a pastoral core. Organic metaphors will refer to developing growing edges, and structuralist ones to building on strengths. Within a narrative framework we speak of storying pastoral identity, and by extension, storying the identity of preacher.

Narrative metaphor and teaching counselling

For a parallel to the utilisation of narrative ideas for pastoral formation and preaching skill development, I turn again to narrative practice. There are a few key institutions that have embraced narrative ideas as they relate to the development of professional competence.

The Education Faculty at the University of Waikato in New Zealand had concerns that the rationalist counselling approaches they were teaching were not addressing gender and power relations, and that western individualistic ideas about the self "were not relevant to Maori ways of seeing the world."[9] These concerns led to the adoption of narrative ideas as the central core of the Counselling Education Program. The Faculty website introduces the program as

> situated within a postmodern framework, emphasising what are often called narrative approaches in counselling and therapy. These approaches depend upon a social constructionist epistemological base. While the specific body of ideas, skills and approaches that draw upon constructionist and postmodern theories and practices are the focus of the programme, attention is also given to a diverse range of mainstream approaches to this work. The work of this programme owes a strong debt to the work of Michael White and David Epston,

9 John Winslade, "Storying Professional Identity," *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, no. 4 (2002): 33.

> whose pioneering development of narrative therapy is widely known for its innovation and effectiveness.[10]

Having made the transition from conventional psychological approaches to teaching narrative and post-structural ideas, the faculty sought to develop a teaching program congruent with these ideas.[11] John Winslade, a faculty member, describes the basic perspective of counsellor education as that of "co-authoring (students and counsellor educators together) a story of professional identity development."[12]

A theoretical basis for the course is established through introduction to "postmodernism, social constructionism, post-structuralism, narrative theory and … discourse analysis."[13] Narrative and constructionist ideas inform the courses offered in basic counselling skills, family therapy, working with groups, mediation and facilitation. These are contextualised within the broader task undertaken by the faculty—that of providing a context for students to develop their professional identity. The opportunities provided for "co-authoring" include the normal progression of interaction with students, from selection interviews, through participation during the course, to final assessment processes.

With a similar perspective, the Clifton Centre in Melbourne draws on language often used to describe the focus of narrative practice in its training program description. Its website states that "the experiences of people's lives—how people understand these experiences and their preferences for the kinds of lives they want to step into" are foundational to the exercise of narrative practice and therefore to the teaching of narrative skills.[14]

The same lens informs the narrative practice training courses run by the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide. Writing about the approach taken, Cheryl White and David Denborough foreground the principle that knowledge is a social and cultural

10 School of Education—Te Kura Toi Tangata, The University of Waikato—Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/departments/index.php?dept_id=3&page_id=4682, accessed 12/6/2008.

11 Winslade, "Storying Professional Identity", 34.

12 Ibid., 35.

13 Ibid.

14 Clifton Centre, Melbourne "About members of the Clifton Centre teaching team" http://www.cliftoncentre.com, accessed 12/6/2008.

achievement.[15] Participants in courses are provided with contexts to explore the origins and history of the skills and values they bring to counselling, to aid their development as counsellors.[16]

Two of the early trainers in narrative within North America, James and Melissa Griffith, reoriented their supervision and teaching in narrative therapy as the result of reviewing the counselling practice of their students. The first third of the redeveloped course emphasises the attitudes and beliefs that will lead to genuine curiosity about how people live their lives, and to an open, respectful atmosphere in the therapeutic situation.[17] They believe that attention to the language used and the assumptions made about people and their problems are essential to the co-development of a helpful "emotional posture" in the counselling room. In a paper documenting their change in orientation, they argue that the epistemological approach taken is more important than the techniques being used.

Rather than being a set of techniques, narrative practice is perhaps best characterised as a set of ideas and commitments, out of which therapeutic skills are developed and practised. Wendy Drewery and John Winslade comment,

> It is about learning to avoid ways of speaking and listening that unintentionally express disrespect for others. We want to focus on ways of producing our selves differently. It is a lifestyle and a political project as much as a therapy.[18]

While some counselling methodologies are taught as techniques, without reference to foundational philosophical or theoretical concepts, the major training centres for narrative practice are explicit in their commitment to engaging with the theoretical basis of narrative practice in training courses. Dulwich Centre, for example, assumes trainees will already have an interest in narrative ideas and lists "a review of key narrative ideas" in the contents of its basic course.[19] One of the first

15 Cheryl White and David Denborough, *A Community of Ideas: Behind the Scenes* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications Pty Ltd, 2005), 102.

16 Ibid., 103.

17 J L Griffith and M E Giffith, "Owning One's Epistemological Stance in Therapy," *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* 1(1992): 5-9.

18 Wendy Drewery and John Winslade, "The Theoretical Story of Narrative Therapy," in *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archeology of Hope*, ed. Gerald Monk, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 32.

19 Dulwich Centre, http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/Narrative_therapy_one_weej_trainings.htm, accessed 12/6/2008.

elements developed for the University of Waikato program—briefly described above—was a collection of readings to summarise comprehensively its theoretical basis. The Centre for Narrative Practice in Manchester, UK, emphasises that engagement with the theories and ideas of narrative practice are essential to skill development.[20]

Attending to the discourses of power is also a consistent theme in narrative practice, whether in developing ideas about the therapeutic relationship or about how to assist people escape from their problems. A Foucauldian awareness of the real impact of power relations impacts the training offered in a number of ways, including an emphasis on questioning normalising judgement both within the counselling and the teaching context, particularly around assessment and accountability. Peggy Sax, who teaches narrative practice, says,

> I believe my approach to teacher-student relations is internally consistent with how I train practitioners to address their positions of power in relation to the people who consult them. I strive to model practices that minimize hierarchy without obscuring power-relations...[21]

An additional feature of congruent training identified by White and Denborough is a recognition and celebration of the diverse ways that individuals engage with narrative ideas in their own contexts, tempered by attention to discernment between structuralist and non-structuralist ways of thinking and speaking.[22] An understanding of the underlying philosophical principles gives a foundation on which creative exploration of the narrative metaphor for counselling can take place.

Congruence

I can pin-point the event at which my intellectual assent to the importance of integrity of content and process moved to heart-knowledge. I had arranged for Atlanta[23] to facilitate a training workshop for clergy and pastoral workers wishing to

20 Centre for Narrative Practice, Manchester, UK "Level One Training" http://narrativepractice.com, accessed 12/6/2008.

21 Peggy Sax, Re-Authoring Teaching: Creating a Collaboratory (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2008), 7.

22 White and Denborough, *A Community of Ideas: Behind the Scenes*, 110-11.

23 A pseudonym.

learn more about ways of working with men who used violence in their relationships. From the very beginning of the workshop, one of the participants constantly challenged the principles being presented, and treated Atlanta and the other participants with disdain. Initially I was concerned both for Atlanta's well-being and the "success" of the workshop. However, as the workshop unfolded, Atlanta addressed each question, challenge and interruption with an attitude that was deeply respectful, and continually invited this man to reconsider the values and beliefs he was expressing. The group witnessed not just an excellent facilitator demonstrating the techniques that we were there to learn, but a person who was deeply committed to the values and beliefs that shaped the approach.[24]

The key principles for counsellor education, congruent with the narrative metaphor and the practice arising from it, could be summarised as:

1. Developing professional identity through exploring the development and connection of relevant elements of the personal narrative, including values and commitments;
2. Engagement with narrative theories and ideas as a foundation to skill development; and
3. Maintaining an awareness of the impact of power relations within the teaching environment.

Imitative practice

Many introductory narrative therapy books use extensive interview transcripts, drawing the learning out of the examples supplied. In *Maps of Narrative Practice,* for example, each chapter opens with an initial paragraph or two, then Michael White introduces the reader to a family or individual that has sought his assistance. The transcripts that follow provide the context for the exploration of the specific topic of that chapter.

Within face-to-face training contexts, student observation of live interviews and video recordings is commonly used. The on-line description of a course facilitated by Maggie Carey in Adelaide, tells us that

24 I have previously related this story in my Master's dissertation: Tanya Wittwer, "Narrative Analysis and Pastoral Formation" (MDiv dissertation, Wartburg Theological Seminary, 2003), 27.

> the teaching methodology will include live interviews, review of therapeutic conversations, sharing stories of work, gaining experience through structured exercises, descriptions of specific maps of narrative practice and group discussion. We hope to create a rigorous and lively learning experience where participants can further develop their ideas and skills in collaboration with others.[25]

The practices and skills of narrative therapy are demonstrated in these interviews, live, recorded or transcribed. Reviewing the interviews gives an opportunity to situate the work, and to model and perform a reflexive approach to narrative practice.

Earlier in this chapter I referred to Donald Schön's inquiry into the epistemology of practice and his notion of the reflective practitioner. Schön concludes that much of the "heart" of professional competence is learned not through lectures or readings, but through practitioners' "capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action".[26] He proposes the development of the professional skills that elude articulation, via a reflective practicum in which a coach/mentor both demonstrates practice and aids reflection on it.[27] The aim is the development of the professional who will continuously reflect in and upon their practice so that they develop the artistry that enables the kind of problem solving "to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice."[28]

A leaflet describing a forthcoming workshop facilitated by David Epston makes explicit his identification with Schön's approach:

> David will teach through the live interviews he will conduct—with one considerable difference: the problems discussed will be 'over and done with' and will permit therefore persistent 'stopping and starting'. David will take time to 'reflect-on-action' (The Reflective Practitioner, Schon 1983) in almost present time. [29]

The workshop format attempts to render visible the thinking behind the practice, as the participants in the workshop as well as those being interviewed are invited to

25 http://www.narrativepractices.com.au/training2010.html, accessed 25/3/2011.

26 Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, viii.

27 Donald A Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), passim.

28 Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, ix.

29 Vancouver Narrative Therapy Centre, http://www.narrative.com.au/workshops-by-international-presenters/david-epston-narrative-therapy.html, accessed 7/1/2011.

"'look into' David's thinking 'thought for thought' and even 'word for word'."[30] At intervals during the workshop, participants are also encouraged to enter into the interview, or role play forward from the point the interview has reached. Following small group discussion of aspects of the ongoing interview the group reconvenes. If those being interviewed are comfortable with the idea, they also respond to questions from the participants regarding their experience of the process.

Reflective practice and preaching

In his doctoral thesis, Allan Demond reviews many aspects of teaching preaching that seem to resonate with the approach taken in narrative practice. He draws on the insights of Schön to develop his own suggestions for teaching preaching, through what he calls *generative imitative practice*.[31] He finds helpful Stephen Newman's re-interpretation of Schön, reaching the conclusion that "the strength of reflection-in-action lies in its capacity to tease out the operating features of a practice";[32] that "learning is seen even more clearly to be social in character and professional knowledge to be communically constructed"; and that "the embodiment of what is known", that is, the "importance of action," is foundational to reflective practice.[33] The iterative concept of reflection-in-action which also incorporates both *reflection-on* reflection-in-action and action for learning seems to embrace the same processes as the research action-reflection model.

Demond reviews the value of case-studies as a way of integrating theory and practice as preaching is learned,[34] of concept mapping to provide a structure to students' insights regarding preaching,[35] and applying Lucy Lind Hogan's notion of a "recipe for preparing a sermon," but as a focus of reflection rather than a safety net

30 Vancouver Narrative Therapy Centre, http://www.narrative.com.au/workshops-by-international-presenters/david-epston-narrative-therapy.html, accessed 7/1/2011.

31 Allan G Demond, "Teaching Preaching: Rehabilitating Imitative Practice with Insights from Donald Schön" (Melbourne College of Divinity, 2007).

32 Ibid., 198, citing *Peter Gilroy and Michael Smith, eds., International Analyses of Teacher Education* (Carfax Publishing Company: Abingdon,1993), 137, and Stephen Newman, *Philosophy and Teacher Education: A Reinterpretation of Donald A. Schön's Epistemology of Reflective Practice* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999), 136.

33 Demond, "Teaching Preaching: Rehabilitating Imitative Practice with Insights from Donald Schön", 198.

34 Ibid., 269.

35 Ibid., 275.

for the beginning preacher.[36] He also suggests continuity of modelling through shared preparation of preaching.[37]

In a more recent paper, Demond's own design for teaching through the concept of generative imitative practice includes a structured progression. To "foster educationally fruitful relationships" he suggests a process beginning with "Noticing and Attending" to specific elements of preaching as modelled, which becomes the focus for "Exploring and Embodying" in playful experimental practice. Through "Discriminating and Personalising" the chosen element in her own preparation, the preacher trials its use in "Risking and Experiencing" before "Reflecting and Evaluating" its usefulness to her preaching. The final step applies the reflection iteratively, to enable "Growing and Improving" her own preaching practice.[38]

Reflective group practice

Within the conceptual framework of the social-construction of reality, there is real benefit in reflection being done with others. To reflect on a pastoral or preaching situation by oneself does not necessarily mean that one maintains an understanding that our view of the situation is perspectival. It is easier to maintain a belief regarding the *truth* of a situation, rather than expanding the reflection into more helpful areas.[39] Learning by reflective interaction with others has the potential to release more creativity, in the space between the words. Rather than a relationship between preaching coach and learner, one that is more congruent with a narrative epistemology is that of peers within a (facilitated) reflective group; the group has its own socio-cultural context, and will bring unseen others into the room.

In a narrative practice workshop, the intention of the format where demonstration is followed by reflection is that it be generative of new ways of questioning that will lead both the trainee and those seeking assistance to go beyond the things that have already been considered and become curious about the issue and

36 Ibid., 276.

37 Ibid., 255.

38 Allan G Demond, "Still Learning to Preach—Imitative Practice," in *Australasian Academy of Homiletics* (2009), 8,9.

39 Caroline Ramsay addresses this issue within an organisational/management context, suggesting the question to ask in (shared) reflection is "what-will-enable coordination"? Caroline Ramsay, "Narrative: From Learning in Reflection to Learning in Performance," *Management Learning* 36(2005): 227.

the things that support and are oppositional to it, and excite the imagination towards novel ways of being and doing. In the preaching context, the intention would be to find the same kind of generativity in relation to ways of exploring God's story in the context of our own.

A major difference between the beginning preacher and the beginning counsellor is that those beginning their journey towards becoming a narrative practitioner will have had limited, if any, exposure to actual narrative conversations; those who will be preachers will generally have had broad exposure to sermons and preachers, as worshipping members of faith communities. When individuals within a seminar or precept group consider a modelled or practised sermon, there will be many sermons and preachers to provide context, contrast and connection. Additionally, preaching can be discussed without a specific sermon being first modelled, as the experience of participants will provide sufficient material to draw on around, for example, a particular genre or concept.

One of the difficulties with a systematic approach to imitative practice is that so much in preaching is contextual: a technique or insight drawn from one sermon may not be relevant in the next weeks of preparation and delivery because of the lectionary or chosen texts, or the context of the preaching. A less-focussed intentional process which encourages curiosity and the identification of previously unknown connections and potential pathways will result in serendipitous insights being articulated within the group. The naming and exploration of these within the group will make it more likely that they will be available to participants at some later stage when they become relevant to a specific sermon or context.

Learning to broker the story

One of the applications of narrative practices to the preaching context is careful listening to the story of the worshipping community. Kathryn Hoffman developed a methodology specifically aimed at developing this aspect of pastoral reflection, which is also an important part of the task of preparation for preaching. In

her unit designed to be "an integrative contextual learning experience," students learned how to be "story brokers."[40]

If one replaces "the biblical story" with a nonspecific "values and commitments," Hoffman's description of a "story broker" sounds very much like the description of the role of a narrative practitioner.

> A story broker *pays attention* to what is happening, *evokes* the stories of what is happening, *listens* carefully to what and how the story is told, *gathers and interlaces* these stories with the biblical story, *discerns* a preferred, emerging story, and *tells that preferred story.*[41]

In the same volume, Mary Clark Moschella also writes about teaching a method of observation and listening that promotes engagement of seminary students with the people they are to serve. Whether labelled as pastoral ethnography (Moschella) or story brokering (Hoffman), this engagement with real stories from within the worshipping and wider community adds to the pastoral formation in a number of ways. It provides a new frame for thinking about congregations or field education sites, as places where students learn from the parishioners, "rather than as practice grounds where they get to expound their newly honed theologies."[42] This attitude of openness to learning will hopefully carry the students through to the end of their ministries. The experience also provides events and stories that become incorporated into the student's own personal narrative: Moschella reports that students "are often surprised and moved and led to imagine a more genuine and *faith-full* pastoral identity."[43] And the exposure to the stories of the community also lays a foundation for a responsive narrative approach to congregational leadership that enables congregations to move beyond unhelpful stories of the past to imagine and choose new ways of faithful living.[44]

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40 Kathryn Vitalis Hoffman, "Shared Narrative: Story Brokering as an Approach to Contextual Learning at Seminary," in *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*, ed. Larry A Golemon (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 87-108.

41 Ibid. , 88.

42 Mary Clark Moschella, "Enlivening Local Stories through Pastoral Ethnography," in *Teaching Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*, ed. Larry A Golemon (Herndon, VI: Alban Institute, 2010), 78.

43 Ibid.

44 Hoffman, "Shared Narrative: Story Brokering as an Approach to Contextual Learning at Seminary," 106, and Moschella, "Enlivening Local Stories through Pastoral Ethnography," 81.

Theological pastoral reflection

The model for pastoral reflection introduced by James and Evelyn Whitehead in their classic *Method in Ministry* foregrounds another essential part of the reflective process as used by preachers—theological reflection.[45] Narrative questioning and reflection involves thinking about and highlighting the values and commitments found within story lines, events and relationships, to find ways of imagining the future and moving toward it. Those of us involved in homiletic adventures have the luxury of our aims and intentions being explicitly based within these values and commitments. Further, we belong to a community that has shared language for exploring meaning in relation to the relationship extended to us by a nurturing God. Theological reflection thus is not only a natural and necessary part of reflective learning for the preacher but is something which a reflective process will encourage as a lifetime practice.

Storying professional identity

There is increasing attention being paid to identity formation as an important part of professional development. Heidi Byrnes writes about curriculum change within a German Department[46] and notes that "the terminology of 'skills' or 'methods' no longer describes our experience." She suggests that the education of teachers should "instead be regarded and practiced as a process of socialization into a professional discourse community that depends on a dual conceptual and affective linkage, a development of their evolving identity as researchers and as teachers."[47]

Early in this chapter I quoted Drewery and Winslade regarding teaching narrative practice; the quotation included the words, "We want to focus on ways of producing our selves differently. It is a lifestyle and political project as much as a therapy."[48] This insight is consonant with the comments above regarding our

45 James D Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, Revised and updated ed. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995). Like Schön, Whitehead and Whitehead link the value of adaptive reflective practice to the complex demands of modern professional practice: "A complex and challenging world challenges us to discern the continuing presence and action of God and to respond, faithfully and effectively, to this presence. For Christian communities and their ministerial leaders this requires a model of reflection." (p 1).

46 Georgetown University, Washington DC

47 Heidi Byrnes, "Reconsidering Graduate Students' Education as Teachers: 'It Takes a Department!'" *The Modern Language Journal* 85, no. iv (2001): 521.

48 Winslade, "Storying Professional Identity," 33, quoted above on page 172.

intentions in preaching arising out of our faith commitment. While there are "strategies of grace" that can enhance the effectiveness of preaching, it is our values and commitments which form the bedrock of preaching practice. Christian formation is therefore intimately entwined with the task of the formation of the preacher, as is deliberate focus on developing the identity of the person as preacher.

Many books on preaching attribute the gift of preaching to an essentialist core. Take, for example, some of the opening words of *Learning Preaching*: "Each of us has within us already the effective preacher God wants us to become."[49] However, within the social-constructivist framework, our identity as preacher, like any experience of the self,

> exists in the ongoing interchange with others ... the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives.[50]

Structuralist or essentialist conceptions of the self tend to be limiting of the possibilities we can see for living in the present or the future, and diminish the sense of personal agency.[51] A narrative concept opens up possibilities for life and for vocation.

A sense of God having called one to preach is considered foundational for the faithful and effective preacher. Hans van der Geest, for example, says it is essential that the preacher has been "personally spoken to and engaged by the gospel and called to proclaim it to others.[52] For some, a theology of call is reason to emphasise the idea of specific giftedness, an essentialist concept.

However, Richard Lischer turns this idea on its head, noting,

> In the act of preaching something dies and something rises. What dies (or should die) is the preoccupation with the self that plagues so many performers. This death is ironic, since some sense of "self" is stimulated by God's call in the first place and is necessary for public speaking. The prophets are uniformly annihilated by a conversation

49 Don M Wardlaw and Fred Baumer, *Learning Preaching: Understanding and Participating in the Process* (Lincoln, Ill.: Academy of Homiletics, 1989), 1.

50 K Weingarten, "The Discourses of Intimacy: Adding a Social Constuctionist and Feminist View," *Family Process* 30(1991): 289.

51 A C (Tina) Besley, "Foucault and the Turn to Narrative Therapy," *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 30, no. 2 (2002): 137.

52 Hans van der Geest, *Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 144.

> with God, only to reappear as powerful individual performers of the word on God's behalf. They do not lack a sense of self.[53]

For the preacher, perhaps even more than for a narrative practitioner, a commitment to de-centring is vital. Seen through the lens of this commitment, a theology of call also provides an entry point to a narrative exploration of identity as preacher, rather than an affirmation of specific charisma of the essentialist form. Jana Childers paraphrases Charles Bartow in her introduction to his book, *God's Human Speech*: "God speaks first... Before, beyond, and during anything we have to say about who God is, God speaks and shapes us."[54] The angels/messengers that God uses to "speak and shape us" include our families and communities, and our forebears in the faith who have brought us the traditions and wisdom of the past.

Among the call narratives of Scripture can be found acknowledgement of the role of the community in the shaping of identity as a preacher. Following the dramatic encounter with God from within the burning bush (Ex 3:1 – 4:13), Aaron affirmed Moses' call and accompanied him to meet the elders of Israel. Thomas Troeger commented, regarding Saul/Paul's equally dramatic meeting with God,

> Perhaps, what happens on the road to Damascus is the prelude to being called to preach, or we might consider it the initial stage of a much larger and more strenuous process. Paul's call begins with a severe dislocation, a shaking of the certitudes that had given him a clear and passionate mission. Whatever his earlier conviction, Luke now pictures him in a time of disorientation: "For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:9).
>
> Luke's narrative leaves Paul there, and turns to an entirely new character. ... The shift from Paul to Ananias suggests that the process of call is not limited to a singular, isolated transaction between an individual and Jesus.[55]

While the central point of Troeger's paper is that a loss of certitude may be a better indicator for discernment of call than certitude itself, he also includes comment on the social context:

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53 Richard Lischer, The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 35.

54 Jana Childers, "Introduction" in Charles L Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Pub Co, 1997), xiii.

55 Thomas H. Troeger, "I Once Was Found, but Now I'm Lost: The Call to Preach as Disorientation and Reconfiguration," in *2010 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics: "The Call to Preach"*, ed. Jana Childers (Atlanta, GA, 2010), 42.

> If someone feels called by Christ to preach, but cannot name how they have known the Gospel through human relationships and human action, I would wonder why they thought Christ could be known through their own human witness.[56]

The narrative metaphor proposes that our lives are constituted by the meanings we give to experience, interpreted through the socio-culturally constructed stories we have of our lives. The story of professional identity as chaplain/pastor/ priest begins somewhere. It may be with images of people whose way of being pastor or chaplain is something we admire: these people become our models. Or the starting point may be the values and commitments we learned and adopted for ourselves within our family or church community. Perhaps the journey of pastoral identity begins in response to interaction with people who needed our care, sought our advice, or declared they believed it was one we should undertake.

These images or commitments or events are unlikely to be the beginning of the story. Stories rarely begin at the beginning. Perhaps they begin now. Or perhaps they are shaped as we select those elements from the past according to what is important now. I have no recollection of the move from being someone who was invited to preach, to being someone that understood herself to be a preacher. Once I was on the other side of that transition, though, I remembered my six-year-old self climbing the steps into the tree-house to preach to the chickens.

Alongside concept, knowledge-base and skill development, teaching preaching is also about "making" a preacher—assisting the candidate to find their identity as a preacher. The elements that come together to make an effective preacher are not located within the individual, but located within a community and society. A deliberate process of co-authoring the story of identity is one possible methodology for formation. Recollections of pieces contributing to our sense of vocational direction are entry points into the story regarding the construction of our identity as preacher. They can therefore be starting points for a deliberate process of formation which takes seriously that identity is constructed within a community, interpreted within a story inhabited by real people.

56 Ibid., 44.

Thickening the story

Denominational candidacy processes often ask for a written account of the spiritual journey that has led to the point of seeking candidacy, including those people and ideas that have had an influence on our spiritual or vocational development. This exercise, itself, begins a process of thickening and enriching the narrative of pastoral identity.

For a faculty using the narrative metaphor for pastoral/preacher formation, there are multiple possibilities for exploring the context in which the students' preaching identity is situated. Some homiletics professors give their students a questionnaire when the course begins, to learn something of their prior experience and expectations. It would be simple to add to the questionnaire or changing its orientation to embrace social-constructionist ideas through inquiry about significant people and influences. Lectures provide opportunities to raise questions about socio-cultural context of call, of spiritual growth and of learning about preaching. Even when lectures are participatory, the size of the class may dictate that for many, their personal answers to questions go unheard; but while this reduces the capacity to build on responses, the questions themselves evoke useful reflection for those listening.

Along with being the venue for practice in sermon preparation and delivery, tutorial or preceptor small groups provide perhaps the most ideal opportunity for thickening the story of being a preacher. An appropriate starting place is exploration by the student of the values and commitments that inform their preaching. While there will be a set of beliefs and accompanying values that it is assumed each student will assent to by virtue of their denominational identity, each individual has their own commitments that they uniquely bring to the vocation.

John McClure reflects:

> We needed to help preachers move toward their own deepest theological convictions about God, Christ, and Church at the point where their living faith and the church's theologies intersect. We had to foster the discovery and embracing of one's working theology and then relate the convictions that constitute that theology to theologians who have articulated similar convictions throughout the church's history. In this way, we sought to connect operative theology with ecclesial theology in such a way as to invite preachers to find

> themselves within the kaleidoscope of the church's theological traditions and contemporary theological constructions.[57]

To assist in the identification of students' own preaching and theological warrants, questions can be asked regarding the skills and values that each person considers most important to the preaching task, or those elements the student believes are foundational to their preaching practice, or a one sentence statement regarding their aim in sermons. The answers to these questions will reveal something about core commitments. Once these have been identified there are questions that will assist in locating these commitments within their history and communities. What are the origins of these values? Who are the people who have been influential in the development or identification of these skills?

Further developing these questions in the line of *remembering practices*[58] will assist the students to look beyond modernist notions of their own individual strengths and skills to see that any skill and knowledge they possess is the product of their history and culture.[59] Lifting their gaze beyond the self, and beyond the classroom, creates the opportunity to see the ways in which identity and purposes are linked with others.

The guidance given to colleague groups regarding the process of feedback to preaching opens up another avenue for exploring both cultural and historical context of commitments and beliefs, and the preacher's own story. In a process that is similar to that used in definitional ceremonies, colleagues could initially reflect on their reaction to the presented sermon. The four categories of response listed in Chapter Five[60]—identifying expressions that captured imagination, describing images evoked by these expressions, embodying responses and acknowledging transport—have value for both sermon critique and thickening of preacher identity. Their contribution to critique of the sermon would be a focus on transformational aspects, with the potential to provide powerful affirmation to the pastoral identity of the one preaching.

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57 John S. McClure, "Preaching Theology," *Quarterly Review* 24, no. 3 (2004): 250.

58 Michael White, *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1997), 56.

59 White and Denborough, *A Community of Ideas: Behind the Scenes*, 102.

60 Page 140

The ideal preceptor group would be held in a room crowded with unseen but named participants in the formation of the preachers and their sermon preparation. Those preaching could be questioned regarding who they were thinking of while constructing the sermon. Colleagues could also mention people who were brought to mind while listening to the sermon.

The sense of preaching while standing on the shoulders of others, and of preparing sermons in a crowded room, can also be encouraged within the classroom. Tom Long refers to the larger cloud of witnesses that is the church itself, and generations of Christian preachers:

> Becoming a competent preacher is not simply a matter of drawing out and strengthening inner traits and gifts, important as that is, but is instead a matter of critical learning about traditions and patterns of thinking and acting that have been honed over the centuries of Christian preaching. Our primary pedagogical emphasis now is not on what is allegedly "in there" in each student, a "little preacher" waiting to grow, but on what is "our there," namely the age-old practice of Christian preaching into which each student must be initiated.[61]

Colleague groups

Many denominational seminaries or theological schools require or encourage students to complete at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). One of the features of the CPE process has been the dynamic learning or interpersonal learning group. The ACPE website describes these as "peer group meetings or interpersonal group sessions for mutual sharing, caring, and support, where relationship concerns are explored; mutual supervision, care giving, challenge and appreciation."[62] The classic CPE dynamic learning group continues the style of the Rogerian encounter groups which were popular during the 60s. One study showed that this aspect of CPE was rated by participants as contributing least to students' learning.[63] The ideas informing the development of the CPE process are structural and essentialist, and therefore oppositional to a post-structuralist approach. One of the objectives for participants in CPE is "to utilize the support, confrontation and

61 Thomas G Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 4,5.

62 Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, http://www.acpe.edu/StudentsFAQ.html, accessed 12/3/2011; http://www.acpe.edu/brochure.htm#WCPE, accessed 28/4/2003.

63 Robert G Anderson, "The Integration of Clinical Pastoral Education with Seminary Learning: Fostering the Student's Ministry Formation," in *Journal of Pastoral Care* 50 (1996), 18.

clarification of the peer group for the integration of personal attributes and pastoral functioning."[64] Based on an understanding that "personal growth" occurs through the insight achieved through confrontation, students are evaluated on how "effectively" they embrace this idea. Some supervisors will provoke confrontation if groups choose not to use it. This methodology can be seen as highly problematic, particularly if we replicate ways of being and models of practice we have witnessed in our ministry preparation once we are in ministry.

However, the organisational and contextual structures of CPE lend themselves well to a narrative approach. It is easy to envisage a reflective learning group organised along the lines of a definitional ceremony. As part of the orientation to CPE, participants are asked to tell the story of their pastoral journey. With a slight rearrangement of agenda, the collection of stories could become the organising principle of the Interpersonal Group. Imagine this hypothetical group:

> *It is Tom's turn to continue his story. Four weeks ago he had told us of his early memories of wanting to be a pastor. Church was his favourite place, the safest place for him. Even through his teenage years, in church he felt grounded. It seemed natural to shape his college years to build a foundation for seminary. We wondered aloud how he would help create in patients' rooms the sense of safety he felt in the church building. We wondered what he imagined he would be like as pastor, and particularly giving care to those who were facing crises of health. He had been working in the hospital since our first session and we were eager to hear how he was experiencing himself as pastor. How was it fitting with his image? Had his understanding of himself as pastor, or of how he would potentially be as pastor, changed?*[65]

It might be thought that a focus on co-authoring the identity of the person as preacher may be antithetical to the decentred position necessary for sound preaching. However, enhancing the knowledge of the professional self in a network of relationships promotes rather than works against finding a decentred stance. At the same time as the story of professional identity is strengthened through threads of the story being interwoven or tied together, the framework of relationships on which the story was formed and which continues to sustain it becomes more apparent. Outsider-witness practices provide a way that the life experiences and relationships

64 http://www.acpe.edu

65 Adapted from a hypothetical written on the basis of my CPE experience, as part of my M Div dissertation: Wittwer, "Narrative Analysis and Pastoral Formation", 38.

of candidates may be honoured and integrated into the narrative of the person as preacher in a way that maintains focus on the preaching task.

The seminary that I attended required its final year students to participate regularly in a small collegial group. I appreciated the intentional reflection time spent with colleagues. However, I can imagine the usefulness of the group being enhanced if students were guided in the basic process and type of response of the definitional ceremony, and encouraged to use it on a number of occasions during the year.

The stories we enter into with our experience do have real effects on our lives. However, the story may not match the reality. Merely asserting that something is so does not make it so. It is the performance of our stories that provides the vehicle for the formation/transformation of the self into the pastoral self. The small group setting is the ideal place for the performance of our preferred ways of being, and as our story is enacted, authenticity is brought to it.

Soon after I graduated from my course of pastoral preparation, a colleague established a private social networking website for the class. In the first few years it provided an invaluable resource as the members of the class continued to support each other through waiting for calls, establishing relationships and programs, and dealing with difficult situations. We gathered ideas for Lenten themes, conversed about Confirmation curriculum, and shared photos of new churches and new babies.

The technology made possible the continuation of the community that had been established at seminary, and the relationships of trust that had developed. These relationships facilitated continued reflection on pastoral identity and practice. We could talk through our failures and successes, perhaps even more candidly than if we had been face to face, and initially there were entries on the website daily. After eight years the role of pastor has become a comfortable one for most, and strong supportive relationships have been established in new locations. The conversations have become sporadic, and they tend to be around those things that one may not or chooses not to share with the local collegial group: tentative steps towards a new call, struggles with mental health, the journeying with a dying partner or parent ... and photos of new churches and new babies.

Power

Because those who preach are in a powerful, privileged position, those who teach preaching have multiple responsibilities and accountabilities regarding the task. We are accountable to those who are learning for the quality and style of teaching, and transparency of process and assessment. We are accountable to the denomination or broader church on issues of content and its communication. We are accountable to those who will listen to the sermons developed by these preachers, through giving feedback, challenging unhelpful use of language and ways of speaking, and in keeping alive the question of power and professional privilege. This is most clearly seen in responsibility to the marginalised regarding the use of language, and choice of metaphors and examples, as they relate to gender, disability, culture, class and heterosexual dominance.[66]

In the previous chapter I referred to outsider witness practices being incorporated into narrative therapy after White and Epston observed the positive impact of issuing certificates of achievement to children, regarding significant developments they had made. The issuing of such certificates and the writing of letters and other documents were part of the early development of narrative therapy. Part of the initial reasoning behind their use was as a reaction to the status that written documents have gained in our society: written applications and CVs are vetted to determine which applicants will be personally interviewed; referral letters may be used to diagnose before even meeting a patient. White and Epston quote Harré, who says, referring to psychiatric case documents, "A file has an existence and a trajectory through the social world, which soon takes it far outside the reach of its subject."[67]

Foucault's analysis of "modern power" illustrates the fashioning of identity according to the norms constructed by the "experts" in specific disciplines. Particularly in the field of mental health, lives are described and redescribed in documents which "are a vehicle for the presentation and display of the author's work

66 This articulation of multiple responsibilities and accountabilities is modelled on the thinking of Cheryl White and David Denborough, regarding the multiple responsibilities and accountabilities of those who teach narrative practice. White and Denborough, *A Community of Ideas: Behind the Scenes*, 108.

67 Rom Harré, "Situational Rhetoric and Self-Presentation," in *Language and Social Situations*, ed. Joseph P Forgas (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985), 179, cited in Michael White and David Epston, *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1989), 129.

according to a moral criteria [sic] that has been established in a particular discipline."[68] The words which compress the person into the thin description of a normalising judgement enable the subjugation of the person, as they construct their own identity from the diagnoses given.

This concern about the use of modern power is one that flows over into the area of assessment of students of preaching, and documentation of that assessment. Daniel Harris emphasises that the role of the preaching professor includes critique of the "practice of preaching, not ... the preacher as a person."[69] Written statements that give label to the person carry a greater weight, even, than the same thing spoken, because of the authoritative status we tend to give to the written word.

However, despite its misuse, documentation can enhance teaching and the development of the preacher's identity. Many practices already used in the teaching of preaching can be reinterpreted as thickening the story of identity. I have already referred to autobiographical accounts as part of candidacy processes, of questionnaires administered at the beginning of or prior to a course, regarding expectations of the course and their own values and commitments. Written reflection pieces are used in many courses of study and may be helpful as a way of enhancing reflective learning and developing the habit of reflecting on practice. Inclusion in a Course Handbook of "archived knowledge"[70] of previous beginning preachers is one way of increasing the number of those supporting the learning experience, as well as enriching the learning of those who contribute in this way.

Beyond concerns regarding the misuse of documents is the larger question of assessment. How does one move away from notions of comparative success and grading, or of normed performance? Is it important to assess the amount learned, through some kind of instrument undertaken before and after the course, or the degree to which a person has helped create a good learning environment for others,

68 Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 189.

69 Daniel E Harris, "Methods of Assessment," in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas G Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 191.

70 A phrase used by Michael White and David Epston to refer to statements made by those who have sought assistance, regarding the learning they discovered as they overcame their difficulties. White and Denborough refer to "archived knowledge" of those who have previously participated in courses on narrative practice. White and Denborough, *A Community of Ideas: Behind the Scenes*, 108.

or the degree to which someone has incorporated the ideas presented in the instructional parts of the course? White and Denborough have some other ideas, suggesting perhaps

> *...the amount you have read or written? Is it the degree of clarity of your spoken contributions, or their degree of kindness? Is it the degree of skill shown in balancing work, study and family life? ... Is it the amount of delight experienced in sharing the ideas with another?*
>
> *...We hope that together ... we will find ways to encourage discernment and rigorous learning, without participants placing themselves or others into continuums of achievement.*[71]

An attitude of collegial learning and openness to feedback is one that will enhance the ability to continue developing as a preacher.

Teaching teachers

A compulsory component of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School doctoral program in homiletics is an intensive "Homiletic Supervision Seminar". Dale Andrews and John McClure have developed this course to enable participants to practise the supervision of preaching in a safe, supported environment where they will receive feedback on their supervision and the opportunity to "repair" mistakes they make.[72] The structure of the course and the expectations on its participants provides a model of respectful, reflective learning that those who go on to teach preaching may well be able to emulate. The process fits well with the narrative metaphor, giving participants the opportunity to rehearse their identity as supervisors of preaching, with a socio-cultural context to enhance authenticity of that identity.

Just as those seeking assistance from narrative practitioners make new discoveries by listening to the conversations of outsider witnesses in a definitional ceremony, so those preaching learn from the discussion being held regarding the supervision. By removing the discussion one step from the one who has preached, space is opened up for deep reflection and additional learning.

The process encompasses alternating roles, so participants get to experience the real effects of various approaches taken to supervision. It is likely that they also

71 Ibid., 104, their italics.

72 John S McClure and Dale Andrews, "Homiletic Supervision Seminar," (Nashville, TN: Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, 2008), handouts made available to the class of 2008.

generate skills in discerning the differing effects of certain ways of approaching preaching. The format provides room for reflection and discussion on preferred ways of giving and receiving feedback.

Teaching preaching

Alongside the teaching of concepts and skills, and the theological and biblical studies considered essential academic preparation for the beginning preacher, a narrative epistemology suggests that joining others in active reflection on preaching, and paying attention to identity formation as preacher are important in the preparation and continuing nurture of the preacher. My own theology of call and understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation and continuing inspiration of a preacher means that my bottom line is that efforts to thicken and enrich our narrative of self as preacher will come to nothing, unless God has called. A vital part of reflection on preaching and reflection on identity will therefore be bringing to mind God's action in those activities—God's role in our story.

This quotation from John McClure seems an appropriate way to bring this chapter to a close, as it highlights the same issues, addressing them from the angle of the functional theology of the preacher:

> We can theologically script and re-script our own lives and the lives of others with great precision and still not know a thing about the transforming power of the Word of God in our own lives, in our preaching, and in our churches. Therefore, throughout all our efforts to improve the ways we preach theology, we must always bend an eye and an ear to the ways in which our theological vocation as preachers is being shaped and developed. It is as we live into this vocation, not just intellectually but also with full existential commitment and embodied energy, that an integration occurs in which we will know, in all of its fullness, what it means to preach theology.[73]

73 McClure, "Preaching Theology," 251.

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CONCLUSION

GOD'S STORY IS MY STORY

The sheer impossibility of covering all relevant material paradoxically makes it more necessary than ever to rely on chance encounters for new influences.
Edward de Bono[1]

This dissertation has resisted being written.

When I began, I thought the irony of my doing doctoral studies in preaching, when my church did not permit women to preach, would keep me motivated. But that attitude of defiance was not sustaining, and has foundered as time has passed.

I know I have been called to preach, and I have no doubt that my own denomination is the context into which I have been called to preach. My earliest memory of this certainty has been kept alive by a photograph of a group of children dressed up in wedding finery. I was three or four at the time, and quite distressed that the adults dressed me in the bridesmaid's dress rather than the clergyman's gown. More distressing was their laughter when I told them I should wear the black gown as I was going to be a pastor when I grew up.

In the time period during which the black gown has almost universally been replaced by a white alb, it seems the church is no closer to affirming—or even testing—my vocational call, than it was fifty years ago. My opportunities to preach have been very limited in the past few years, and the groundswell movement towards the ordination of women has become quite dispirited. Many individuals have left the church, and others have made the decision that it's too difficult to change the denomination and that disobedience at the local level is the better option. While those within the church working towards the ordination of women have lost energy, the outside influences trying to ensure it doesn't happen seem only to get a stronger foothold within the decision-making corridors of the church.

However, into this dispiritedness my companions in this study have kept speaking to me personally. In her introduction to her study of testimony, Anna

1 Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking,* (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1970), 43

Carter Florence said of those figures from America's past that she had chosen as representatives of the tradition of women preachers:

> They had no desire to be aligned with powers and authorities, or to preach like those who were. They did not necessarily campaign for ordination or admittance to the inner circles of power. Instead, they located themselves on the margins of power and authority, far from the center and its privileges... Preaching is not a right or a privilege reserved for those who locate themselves at the power center. Preaching, as these women remind us, is the slow work of standing in one's own life and in the Word of God and saying what one sees and believes, no matter the consequences.[2]

This was a powerful reminder that just as when I consult a family or an individual about their lives I have no expert status, no authority to speak into their circumstances, except their invitation, so when I preach I do so with no authority or expertise—only invitation. And alongside invitation sit vision, relationship and call.

When walls built of precise constitutions and "right" interpretation confronted me, Rebecca Chopp gently spoke about openness to new ways of speaking and proclaiming freedom as being fundamental to the Christian church.

> In this way to proclaim the Word to and for the world is not to claim a secure end, a final subject, a clear language, a determined politics, but precisely to open up the possibilities to live and move in the complexities, ambiguities, and richness of language, subjectivity, and politics. It is to speak forth of continual union and separation, incarnation and diffusion, in the emancipatory process of new life that both is and is to come.[3]

And Florence entered again into the conversation, reminding me of Chopp's understanding of "the church as the embodied relations of Word and words", to declare,

> If women or any oppressed persons make for themselves a space in or outside the church to speak freely and proclaim freedom from the margins, then there, too, we find proclamation; we find the church. ... And women ... can and do proclaim freedom wherever they are, even if they are not formally recognized or "ordained" or constituted as the church to do so! Whenever this happens, the

2 Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 3-4.

3 Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 124.

> space they create in the act of proclamation will be a community of faith: the church.[4]

With the encouragement of these women, I have been prepared to accept the authority of my membership among those who come together regularly to listen to sermons, and the authority of my own life and vocational experience, and write about preaching.

Alberto Manguel, in the Massey lectures, shared with me that "since stories, unlike scientific formulations, don't expect (reject, in fact) clear-cut answers, I can muddle around in this territory without feeling bullied into providing solutions or advice."[5] Thus reinforced, I have been content to muddle around with a tool—narrative practice—and apply it in a context other than the one for which it was designed. In this exercise of bricolage it has seemed most useful to notice those things that may be helpful rather than dwelling on difference.

The definitive philosophical foundation

Narrative practice has evolved through reflection on and extension of practice from theoretical viewpoints developed in other disciplines. Integral to it has been an openness to the ideas of other people and other disciplines, accepting that which is useful without critiquing that which does not fit, sharpening one's own thinking and skills without demolishing the other. The community of narrative practitioners bring the same respectful curiosity to their interaction with colleagues as they do to clients. Christian Beels recalls,

> I remember in one of the workshops, I was coming up with the kind of penetrating 'good questions'—implicitly critical—that I would have raised at Grand Rounds in my Department of Psychiatry, and I was quietly—and kindly—told just to pay attention to what the speaker was trying to get at. In other words, see where it leads, what it is for, not what is wrong with it. ...
>
> Conferences of this kind are performances of a style of teaching and learning that assumes a sort of journeyman collegiality between the members. The presenters are saying, ''Watch what I

4 Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 98.

5 Alberto Manguel, *The City of Words: Understanding Civilisation through Story*, Massey Lectures (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 3.

> do and see if you can use this in your work—and let us leave plenty of time to talk.''[6]

Having witnessed the liberating impact of narrative practice in those that entered into dialogue with me, and having also experienced it as one consulting a narrative therapist, I know it works. I was therefore keen to think about narrative practice in relation to preaching, using the theoretical base as inspiration rather than restriction. I wanted to engage in a process of "Watch what I do and see if you can use this in your work", with "plenty of time to talk."

There is no single unified post-modern, constructivist narrative epistemology. One of the criticisms of narrative therapy is that it lacks a coherent philosophical or theoretical base. While Michael White, the most significant figure in the development of narrative practice, traces his influences to the writings of people like Gregory Bateson and Michel Foucault, it was through the application of these ideas in the actual counselling setting that the practice developed. White continued to take inspiration from a range of disciplines and encouraged his colleagues to share the ideas that they developed themselves.[7] Ultimately it is not the philosophical basis which is important to narrative therapy, but the usefulness of the approach to the people seeking assistance from practitioners.

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6 C Christian Beels, "Some Historical Conditions of Narrative Work," *Family Process* 48(2009): 369.

7 Donald L Bubenzer, John D West, and Shelly R Boughner, "Michael White and the Narrative Perspective in Therapy," *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 2, no. 1 (1994): 71-72.

David Denborough provides a succinct summary of the major influences, and Michael's use of them: "it was through a creative engagement with a diversity of authors that Michael would find a new language to describe innovative therapeutic practice. He did not read to confirm ideas, instead to further stretch them. Different authors provided inspiration for different practices. In the early years, it was Bateson (1972, 1979) who provided metaphors of redundancy; Goffman (1961) who provided the term 'unique outcome'; Geertz (1983), Bruner (1986) and other interpretive social scientists who laid the groundwork for the text analogy; Myerhoff (1982, 1986) who provided concepts of re-authoring, re-membering and definitional ceremony; and of course, Foucault (1979, 1980, 1984) who provided a framework by which to understand modern power/knowledge and normalizing judgment and therefore enabled Michael to set a course towards resurrecting subjugated knowledges. More recently, it was the writing of Derrida (1978) who inspired the notion of 'the absent but implicit'; Vygotsky (1986) who offered scaffolding to consider the significance of concept development; and Deleuze (1993) who was providing new understandings and appreciations of 'difference'." David Denborough, "Some Reflections on the Legacies of Michael White: An Australian Perspective," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 30, no. 2 (2009): 96.

> Most of the "discoveries" that have played a significant part in the development of our practices have been made after the fact (in response to unique outcomes in our work with families) with theoretical considerations assisting us to explore and to extend the limits of these practices.[8]

On April 4th, 2008 Michael White died, aged 59, having suffered a heart attack while in San Diego, USA, where he was to teach at a conference. While examining a complete œuvre to find the definitive underlying philosophy and then apply it to preaching would be elegant, it would be inconsistent with the aims of his work to do so. Narrative practice aims to "shift power from the expert professional therapist or teacher toward the beneficiaries of the process, thus changing the character of both therapy and training."[9] Michael was as insistent on de-centring the founder as he was on de-centring the therapist. In an early publication, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative & Imagination,* White and Epston said:

> We have been steadfast in our refusal to name our work in any consistent manner. We do not identify with any particular "school" of family therapy, and are strongly opposed to the idea of our own contribution being named as a school. We believe that such a naming would only subtract from our freedom to further explore various ideas and practices, and that it would make it difficult for others to recognize their own unique contributions to developments in this work, which we regard to be an "open book."[10]

Eschewing the role of guru, and constantly pointing to the imagination and courage of his interlocutors (whether clients[11] or colleagues), Michael preferred a characterisation of narrative practice as something which was—like a narratively constructed identity—"becoming." Practitioners of narrative therapy will continue

8 David Epston and Michael White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1992), 9.

9 Beels, "Some Historical Conditions of Narrative Work," 364.

10 Epston and White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination*, 8,9.

11 Maps of Narrative Practice concludes: "I view all the therapeutic practices described in these pages as having evolved from our co-research. In the course of therapeutic consultations, I regularly solicit feedback from people about which avenues of conversation are working for them and which are not, and, at the finale, I initiate a review of what was helpful and what wasn't helpful in our effort to address the predicaments and concerns of their lives. This feedback and these reviews have been instrumental in shaping my practice and fundamental to the development of the ideas and maps presented in this book. In concluding this book I give heartfelt thanks to all of you for these contributions, which I remain ever-conscious of in my work and my life." Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York ; London: W W Norton & Co., 2007), 292.

to innovate and to share their discoveries. Local groups within any field will develop theory and practice along differing trajectories, and the spread is likely to bring a greater diversification within the narrative practice field now than when Michael provided very personal leadership and the example of his engaging work.

Future directions

Possibly the final conversation I had with Michael was at the 2007 International Summer School of Narrative Practice. In a quiet moment between sessions I asked him about the directions of his current reading. He spoke of his fascination with the work of Gilles Deleuze, a contemporary of Michel Foucault. He was playing with ideas regarding the possibilities for new relationships or life directions, based on Deleuze's idea of "swarms of difference".[12] Sarah Walther and Maggie Carey note that "the ideas of Gilles Deleuze invite an orientation to therapeutic practice which supports the people we meet with to move from 'how things are' to 'how things might be'; from 'being' to 'becoming'."13

Deleuze's concept of identity as "becoming" rather than "being" fits well with a narrative epistemology, where identity is considered fluid and always in the process of being reconstituted through social and political processes. This, and the other dynamic naming ('how things might be'), strongly resonate as images for the Christian life. We might ask, with Deleuze, "How do we do what it is we wish to become?" Moreover, Deleuze's notion of the coincidence of past, present and future time[14] meshes with the Christian awareness of the now-but-not-yet sovereignty of God. As Bonhoeffer invited us to see,

> Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.[15]

12 Gilles Deleuze and Constantin V Boundas, *The Deleuze Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), passim.

13 Sarah Walther and Maggie Carey, "Narrative Therapy, Difference and Possibility: Inviting New Becomings," *Context*, no. 105 (2009): 3.

14 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), 79.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. from the fifth German edition (1949) by John W Doberstein (London SCM Press, 1954), 38.

For me, the congruence between preaching and narrative practice is derived from some shared foundational beliefs. Jill Freedman and Gene Combs state, in a set of on-line notes: "we become who we are through relationship."[16] "We become who we are through relationship" is a very appropriate phrase for the day I am writing this, the Festival of Epiphany. It evokes, for me, images of the incarnation. Moreover, like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, I believe that to be created in the image of God[17] means to be created for community, for relationship.

The focus within narrative practice on liberation, on hope, on restorying to enable stepping into one's preferred future, all resonate with preaching's aim. The deliberate stepping aside into a decentred position brings to mind the painting of Lucas Cranach the Elder, of Christ being in the centre while Martin Luther preaches. Yet, contrarily, it also draws me to thinking about our relational God of the margins, the God who decentres Godself.

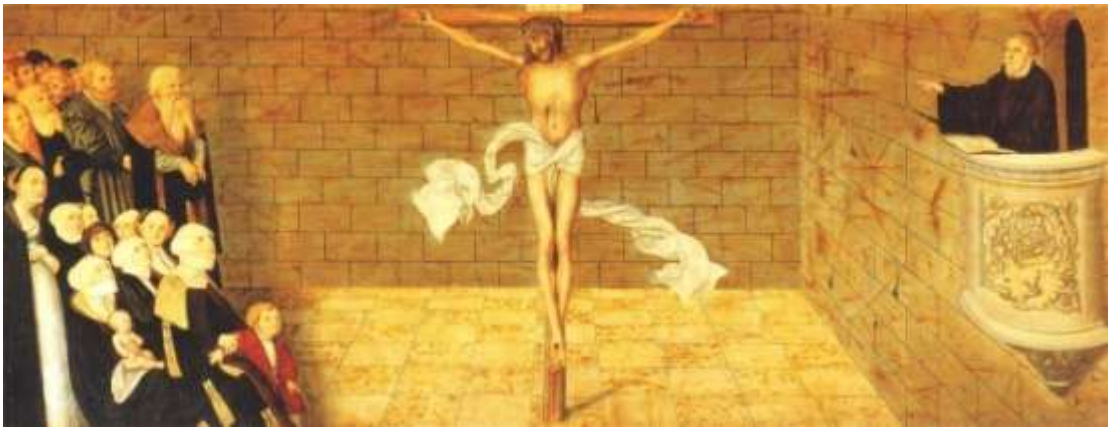

Fig 3 Lucas Cranach the Elder, Wittenberg Altarpiece. Detail: predella: Sermon of Martin Luther (Marienkirche, Wittenberg)

And the style of counselling that pays attention to the influence of power, and works to enable rather than advise, is one that has integrity with the core of my theological understanding. Using the language of narrative practice, the most sparkling of moments, the breath-takingly unexpected event in our community history is the gift of reconciliation through the Christ event. It is an initiative of

16 Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, "Narrative Worldview," http://www.narrativetherapychicago.com/narrative_worldview/narrative_worldview.htm

17 Gn 1:26-28

love from God toward God's creation.[18] The incarnation is the agency by which the tears in the fabric of creation would be mended. Incarnating God's love to the world, radically oriented toward God and God's sovereignty, and giving expression to the reality of God who is concerned about humanity, the person of Jesus shows us alternative truths that have been rendered invisible in the discourse of the day. Fully human, participating fully with humanity, Jesus shared the agonies and ecstasies of human existence, and revealed God's compassion to the world.

In the event of the cross we see "the astonishing reality that God's power is not controlling … but quietly, deeply, almost imperceptibly changing the terms of the conflict."[19] For Elijah YHWH was not in storm, earthquake or fire, but in sheer silence;[20] for Job the answer to suffering lay in paradox, in the creative power of God.[21] The cross does not answer the "Why?" but stands as a sign of the reality of pain and suffering. It is the final "No!" to oppression, corruption and violence, to power being used over others. In the Christ event God brought about the unique exception—the time that things were done differently, that violence did not win.

Denis Edwards expresses it this way,

> What does the death and resurrection reveal about the nature of divine action? ... *First, in the Christ-event, we find that God's self-giving and saving love actively waits upon creaturely response.* It does not overwhelm or coerce.[22]

We "perform" our personal narrative through the way we act and the decisions we make. The existence and activity of the church is our performance of our group narrative. As we "do" and sing our faith together, that which we hold in common is strengthened.

In the baptismal newness of each day we have the foundation from which to constantly examine our own practices, being open to deconstructing narratives

18 2 Cor 5:18, Eph 2:4-7.

19 Sally Purvis, The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 88.

20 1 Kgs 19:11-18.

21 Jb 38-41.

22 Denis Edwards, How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action (Hindmarsh, S. Aust.: ATF Theology, 2010), 29.

which privilege our use of power over others or our cooperating with institutional or societal oppression. As church we have opportunity to constantly examine our practices to avoid establishing new idols or dividing practices. Our response to the grace of God is to be *salt* and *light*, and like leaven in the dough of society resisting that which oppresses, without being drawn in, so that the dominant culture might be humanised.[23]

Narrative epistemology and preaching

This study has found that explicitly naming and exploring a narrative epistemology can provide a framework to bring together many of the accepted ideas regarding effective preaching. Each chapter included key concepts from the current homiletic literature. Even my core warrant can be found elsewhere: Sherman Cox wrote in an e-zine article, "The African American preacher seeks to have the people become so identified with the story in the Bible that the story becomes their story."[24]

Many resources draw on postmodern, social-constructionist ideas, but because the field of narrative has developed in diverse disciplines and along many different paths during the 20th century, there is not a common language or even common philosophical foundation. Nonetheless there is harmony between the ideas of many key writers and this epistemological framework. The strongest resonance with this work is found in Walter Brueggemann's call to preachers to invite those listening to "*abandon the script in which one has had confidence*" and to enter into "an alternative narrative, which is the narrative of the life-giving kingdom of God."[25]

Chapter Two explored the space between the words, to leave room for the making of meaning, and for the formational and transformational movement of the Spirit. Alongside all that has been written regarding the role of the imagination in the crafting and reception of preaching is encouragement to use language that is tentative, open and invitational. The application of Vygotsky's

23 Mt 5:13-16, 13:33.

24 Sherman Cox, Characteristics of Black Preaching, EZine Articles, http://ezinearticles.com/?Characteristics-of-Black-Preacahing&id=91660, accessed 28/3/2011.

25 Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of home : preaching among exiles*, 1st ed, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 34-35.

work on scaffolding is not something I have seen elsewhere, but it aligns with Barbara Lundblad's concept of *moving from points of lesser to greater resistance*.[26]

Chapter Three explored aspects of the effective use of metaphor. Sally McFague's work was seminal in raising awareness of the power of metaphor, captured in this quote from Cas Vos:

> Metaphors are explosive and their force hurls people towards new insights and blasts open new worlds. Metaphors that enlighten the faithful also enable them to experience surprises and moments of awe in their everyday life.[27]

As I commented in Chapter Four, much has also been written about prophetic preaching and deconstruction. The narrative lens reminds us of the preacher's opportunity to also deconstruct localised or intimate aspects of oppressive discourse, to strengthen neglected threads of the personal narrative, and to seek and name the absent but implicit within the stories of those for whom we preach. Chapter Five focused on preaching as an exploration of the chosen associations of life and a way to highlight the connections between people in the context of the gathered people of God, who together are the Body of Christ. Integrity of process and content provided an avenue for exploration in the sixth chapter on teaching preaching, and again it was found that the narrative framework gave a structure for much that is known about effective teaching.

At a basic level, the simple key to opening up a narrative epistemology for those who preach is the concept that we find identity and meaning through a personal narrative. Embracing this concept creates an orientation toward joining people in their particular experiential worlds, honouring their stories and encouraging the articulation of them. As we listen to individual and group stories, we seek to respect the significance they give to them. In preaching we unpack and unmask the oppressive threads in the narrative, lifting up the hopes and values that go unnoticed but are hidden within the stories. When we assist the creation of new meaning, those listening might find new possibilities for hope.

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26 Barbara Lundblad, Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 55.

27 Cas J A Vos, "Preaching as a Language of Hope. Societas Homiletica 6," in *Preaching as a Language of Hope*, ed. Cas J A Vos, Lucy L Hogan, and Johan H Cilliers (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007), 22.

God's story is my story

Oriented towards this narrative understanding, at its heart preaching can be conceptualised as an opportunity to assist people to identify those golden threads within their personal narrative where their story has intersected with God's story. Sometimes the threads will be invisible to those who come heavily laden, but the identification of the absent but implicit, the use of metaphor and imagery may help reveal them. We can attend to and name these golden threads, or weave them together through scaffolding. We can explore Scriptural and contemporary stories, wandering through the landscapes of action and identity, or invite the telling and retelling of these stories so that the gossamer threads become thick and rich, resilient for the contingencies of life. The sermon and its liturgical context can lift up the community of support, so there is an audience to the preferred story, a history, and a future.

Our aim in preaching is an encounter with the living God, that those listening may move toward their preferred story, the

> hidden heavenly reality that exposes the visible world as counterfeit. What *ought* to be, for those with eyes of faith, already *is.* Living by faith entails maintaining, through creative imagination and communal reinforcement, a vivid sense of God's counter-reality as more real than apparent reality itself.[28]

Rather than a methodology, a narrative approach is a theological attitude and anthropological or epistemological understanding.

In my introduction I noted that attributing the efficacy of a sermon to the Holy Spirit removed agency from the preacher, and failed to explain why only some preaching is transformational. On the other hand, looking to communication and other theories seemed to lack integrity if preaching was, indeed, the encounter named above. A narrative approach gives room for "strategies of grace"[29] that facilitate awareness of God's activity in one's life and reception of the Spirit's stirrings. Ben de Klerk speaks of the "homiletical concept of bipolarity", stating,

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28 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, ed. Walter Wink, The Powers ; V. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 323.

29 Thomas H Troeger, "A Poetics of the Pulpit for Post-Modern Times," in *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: W B Eerdmans, 1994), 49.

> In preaching two processes are at work: one a theological process, namely God's initiative through his Spirit, and the other a communicative process in which God encounters human beings. ... In the relationship God takes the initiative and the first and last word belong to Him. In this respect the preacher puts his trust on the role of the Holy Spirit who engages humans in the actions of God.[30]

Reflection on the relationship between God and humanity as it impacts identity and meaning opens a way through the apparent contradiction of combining an approach which seeks enhanced personal or group agency and considering the active agency of the Holy Spirit in the results of proclamation.

Narrative without therapy

When I've shared these ideas within seminars or at conferences, preachers readily grasp the central idea of a narrative epistemology, and follow up by discussing the application of specific practices to their own situations. A pastor from India mused about using a scaffolding approach to address, with his primarily wealthy congregation, the topic of societal injustice. A colleague from Sweden contemplated the use of remembering practices to proclaim the Gospel in the context of a funeral service, where eulogies are expected, not sermons.

An Australian audience asked if I deliberately applied the ideas to my own sermon writing (and specifically the sermon I had used to illustrate my presentation). I could only share that, because of my social-constructivist world view, it is inevitable that I do apply the ideas, without it being a deliberate process. One participant in that group said that while he was unsure as to how he would use the ideas in crafting his own sermons, he now had some tools that enabled him to understand why some of his wife's sermons were so effective.

A systematic application of a narrative epistemology as a framework for approaching preaching and the teaching of preaching will be strengthened by removing the intervening variable of narrative therapy. In the spirit of this work, one way would be to begin with those philosophical underpinnings that have yielded fruit for therapeutic encounters, but to come to it with an attitude of

30 Ben J de Klerk, "Preaching Hope within a Societal Context of Hunger and of Affluence," in *Preaching as a Language of Hope. Studia Homiletica 6*, ed. Cas J A Vos, Lucy L Hogan, and Johan H Cilliers (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007), 187.

openness to learning and discovery. In conversation with preachers and those who listen to preaching, we could discover what works, and then bring those pieces into conversation with theoretical elements to "explore and extend the limits of these practices."[31]

Narrative therapy has relished conversation with other disciplines, and a narrative approach to preaching would be enriched through drawing on the ideas of other disciplines to expand our imagination. I would enjoy playing further with a narrative epistemology and the nature of God. How does socially-constructed identity line up with Tillich's thesis that God is the structure that is behind reality and the source or ground of all that is?[32] If it is the personal narrative that structures our reality and is the source of our identity, is the Word the songline of this narrative? Does a narrative epistemology isolate speeched humanity from the rest of creation?

For further exploration

In these pages I have explored many key elements of narrative practice for ideas that may assist in thinking about the preaching task. It has not, of course, been an exhaustive exploration; I have focussed on those practices which I believed would yield most fruit in relation to preaching. Two significant elements were only briefly mentioned: White's notion of externalising problems, and the commitment of narrative therapists to social justice.

One of White's earliest innovations was to view people as separate from problems. Those seeking assistance from counsellors generally attribute the difficulties that motivated their visit to flaws in their character or identity, or the identity of others. Efforts to address problems or issues viewed in this way tend to exacerbate rather than resolve them, and failure to find solutions adds to the "thin" conclusions that have already been made about the self.

Foucault's archaeological work on the modes of objectification of the subject through "dividing practices", totalisation and "normalising judgement"

31 Epston and White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination*, 9.

32 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology / 1. Reason and Revelation. Being and God* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 238.

demonstrated the arbitrary way that problems are socially constructed.[33] Within a narrative framework, instead of people *having* a problem or *being* a problem, they are encouraged to think of themselves as *struggling with* a problem which is acting upon them and affecting their life. The identity of the self is differentiated from problematic behaviours, attitudes, beliefs or lifestyles. The understanding that problems are external to the persons experiencing them opens conceptual space allowing people to take initiatives to work against the influence of the problem in their lives. The dynamic of interaction between persons and problems can be examined. Groups of people— families, communities—can be united in working together against the oppressive influence of the problem as expressed in the dominant discourse.

It would be intriguing to explore this notion in theological reflection on the nature of sin, reconciliation and sanctification, and the impact of this idea on preaching. Concepts to explore include sin as totalising discourse, sin within a relational context as separation from God, and Bultmann's idea of sin as "the illusion of self-sufficiency".[34] What might be discovered by thinking about the "unique outcomes" approach to problems, in relation to our guilt and shame regarding those things we see as failures to live faithfully as God's children?[35]

Public therapy, public theology

Intrinsic to the commitment of narrative practitioners to social justice is a responsibility to enter the public debate to address issues of privilege and dominance, and to initiate social action. The Dulwich Centre Foundation, for example, established from the fees paid by people learning narrative therapy from Michael White, financed community work with people whose lives were affected by psychiatric disabilities. Since then the source of funding has diversified and a myriad of community projects have been undertaken. One of the current projects

33 Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy*, Theories of Psychology (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 41-44.

34 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 20.

35 "Addressing Personal Failure" is a theme that occurs often in White's conference presentations, training and writing e.g. Michael White, "Workshop Notes" (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 2005), 24-28.

is exploring "intergenerational honouring" as a way of addressing conflict in migrant communities.[36]

In Australia the narrative community has been particularly active in responding to migrants and refugees who have suffered hardship and trauma in their home countries. At a time when the churches have been quite timid in speaking out against the injustices perpetuated against these people on our own shores, I wonder if we can learn something from narrative practice regarding the role of the preacher in the public arena.

Mary Doak comments,

> A truly liberating public theology cannot ... be captive to a white and middle-class vision of the common good, but must itself become the diverse and open conversation it envisions for our public life. Those of us who are white, middle-class, and/or from mainstream religious traditions must find a way to contribute our voices without reinforcing a hegemonic discourse that stifles others. ... there are resources in the Christian tradition for welcoming otherness and respecting diversity, and these should be a part of any theological contribution to public life.[37]

Just as narrative practitioners feel impelled to address the injustice of privilege and dominance, so those of us embracing liberationist theologies argue that we have an obligation to speak out against injustice in the public arena. This necessarily implies careful listening to those who are on the margins of society.

Cautions

In a concluding chapter, it seems appropriate to pause for a moment to consider whether reasons exist to be cautious about applying a narrative epistemology to preaching. Strengths may be weaknesses. Two concerns occur to me around the notion of exclusion: the potential for the concept of a narrative identity to be oppressive, and the exclusionary nature of specialised knowledge. A third concern is one relevant to many ideas regarding communication through preaching.

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36 Dulwich Centre Foundation, http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/dulwich-centre-foundation.html, accessed 20/3/2011.

37 Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology*, Suny Series, Religion and American Public Life (New York: State University of New York, 2004), 19.

Doak refers to the Prasenjit Duara's argument that "the narrative constitution of identity is oppressive insofar as it posits an excluded other, and at the same time, establishes the terms on which that other is understood." [38] All that we attempt, even the liberation of the other, is tempered by the brokenness of humanity. However, an attitude of openness to and curiosity about the other, explicit in this version of a narrative approach, works against this negative "othering". Doak responds,

> In Ricoeur's hermeneutics ... the necessary perspectival and limited character of all narratives does not inherently result either in a clash of narratives or in capitulation to a hegemonic narrative. Ricoeur maintains that we do not face a forced option between the imperialistic imposition of our own terms of understanding or silence in the face of an unknowable other; instead, we can pursue greater mutual understanding through the determination of common ground, a fusion of horizons in which differing views can be heard and can challenge each other. Alternative viewpoints (including narratives) need not be encountered simply as different or as the same, but rather as analogous, as similar-yet-different and thus able to challenge our current presuppositions and expand our horizons.[39]

The non-essentialist but fluid notion of identity construed through narrative also speaks to this concern. The potential for excluding the other by this understanding is minimised as we acknowledge that we are "becoming", and maintain an awareness of the socio-cultural context of our identity efforts.

As I worked through this study I became aware of how often I felt the need to use specific vocabulary to describe narrative practices. Despite the explicit non-expert approach of narrative practice, the language used can exclude the non-initiated from conversations, and it can highlight the possibility that those using a narrative approach consider the differing perspectives of others as inferior. This is a real concern.

On the other hand, while structuralist notions still dominate, after more than a century of application of narrative ideas to a broad range of disciplines, a narrative perspective is increasingly recognised. My initial literature surveys uncovered very few publications making explicit reference to a narrative

38 Ibid., 100, citing Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

39 Ibid., 101.

epistemology within a preaching or congregational setting, and none exploring it systematically. It was exciting, therefore, to discover the Narrative Project of the Alban Institute,[40] and know that there are colleagues in the church also engaging with narrative ideas.

A final concern is that the various practices explicated in this study might be understood as techniques to be learned and aped. When counsellors new to narrative therapy take a set of questions they have seen modelled and attempt to use them within a consultation, the result is likely to be wooden and unhelpful. A narrative approach to counselling is primarily conceptual and attitudinal rather than a set of techniques. The same applies to preaching. James Nieman expressed this concern well regarding "studying the context of preaching":

> At a basic level, *contextual study* can be a crucial way toward more relevant and engaged preaching. As soon as this is said, though, a warning is needed. To explore our context … should not become a preaching gimmick, another new tool for fixing a problem. This treats context superficially as a field of reception into which sermons are launched. Worse still, it treats those who hear sermons as hapless victims we manipulate by condescending to learn about them. Preaching is more than religious communication and its listeners are more than spiritual consumers.[41]

His comment can be applied to all approaches to and techniques of sermon writing, including a narrative one.

In conclusion

When I hear the phrase "narrative preaching", I do not understand it as proclamation through story-telling, or constructing sermons in the shape of narrative. A narrative sermon, understood through the lens of a narrative epistemology, is one that is constructed to facilitate the co-creation of meaning or the co-authoring of the personal or group narrative to embrace God's story of God's involvement with the world. While embodied in its delivery, it is one constructed with the intention that the preacher will not get in the way of the working of the Spirit.

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40 The Alban Institute, "Key Findings of the Narrative Leadership Project," http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=6174, accessed 10/4/2011.

41 James R Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching*, Elements of Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 6.

I leave it to Stanley Haerwas to bring us one final paradox:

> our lives are intelligible only to the extent that we discover we are characters in a narrative we did not create. The recognition of our created status produces not tolerance, but humility. Humility derives not from the presumption that no one knows the truth, but rather is a virtue dependent on our confidence that God's word is truthful and good.
>
> The story ... cannot be abstracted from the people that embody the story. Lives matter... Through the giving and receiving of the story the whole church through the work of the Holy Spirit participates in that to which they witness. [42]

It seems inevitable that, having reached the end of this work, we are ready to begin.

42 Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching as Though We had Enemies.* http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/09/003-preaching-as-though-we-had-enemies--9, accessed 13/2/2011.

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Appendix

Table 1: Basic Beliefs of Alternative Paradigm Positions[1]

Issue	*Positivism*	*Postpositivism*	*Critical Theory et al.*	*Constructivism*	*Participatory*
Ontology	Naive realism—"real" reality but apprehendable	Critical realism—"real" reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	Historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values crystallized over time	Relativism—local and specific constructed realities	Participative reality—subjective-objective reality, cocreated by mind and given cosmos
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist/objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	Transactional/subjectivist; value mediated findings	Transactional/subjectivist; created findings;	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional, and practical knowing; cocreated findings
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic/dialectical	Hermeneutic/dialectical	Political participation in collaborative action inquiry; primacy of the practical; use of language grounded in shared experiential context
Axiology	Propositional knowing about the world is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable		Propositional, transactional knowing is instrumentally valuable as a means to social emancipation, which is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable		Practical knowing how to flourish with a balance of autonomy, cooperation, and hierarchy in a culture is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable

1 From John Heron and Peter Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, (1997): Table 1: 289, based on Table 6.1 in Egon G Guba and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 1994), 109.

Table 2: Paradigm positions on selected issues[2]

Issue	*Positivism*	*Postpositivism*	*Critical Theory et al.*	*Constructivism*	*Participatory*
Nature of knowledge	Verified hypotheses established as fact or laws	Nonfalsified hypotheses that are probably facts or laws	Structural/historical insights	Individual reconstructions coalescing around consensus	Extended epistemology: primacy of practical knowing; critical subjectivity; living knowledge
Knowledge accumulation	Accretion—"building blocks" adding to "edifice of knowledge"; generalizations and cause-effect linkages		Historical revisionism; generalization by similarity	More informed and sophisticated reconstructions; vicarious experience	In communities of inquiry embedded in communities of practice
Goodness or quality criteria	Conventional benchmarks of "rigor": internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity		Historical situatedness; erosion of ignorance; action stimulus	Trustworthiness and authenticity and misapprehensions	Congruence of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowings; leads to action to transform the world in the service of human flourishing
Voice	"Disinterested scientist" as informer of decision makers, policy makers, and change agents		"Transformative intellectual" as advocate and activist	"Passionate participant" as facilitator of multivoice reconstruction	Primary voice manifest through aware self-reflective action, secondary voices in illuminating theory, narrative, movement, song, dance, and other presentational forms
Training	Technical and quantitative; substantive theories	Technical, quantitative, and qualitative; substantive theories	Resocialization; qualitative and quantitative; history; values of altruism and empowerment		Coresearchers are initiated into the inquiry process by facilitator/researcher and learn through active engagement in the process; facilitator/researcher requires emotional competence, democratic personality and skills
Accommodation	Commensurable		Incommensurable		
Hegemony	In control of publication, funding, promotion, and tenure		Seeking recognition and input		Emergent and at present essentially countercultural in Western societies

2 From Heron and Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," Table 2: 290, based on Table 6.2 in Guba and Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research", 112.

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