

Journal of Bible Storying

September 2023 — for private circulation only — Issue 39

My Journey Into The World of Narrative By Dr. Larry Dinkins

The careful exegetical preaching of professors at Dallas Theological Seminary drew me to that institution in 1975. During the next four years I was trained to be a critical thinker who could analyze the minutia of a text in both Hebrew and Greek. My exposition of a Bible text was logical, purposeful, abstract and weighted heavily in the doctrinal sections of the epistles. As an assistant pastor I honed my cognitive skills at a Bible church that valued detailed exposition. My initial “pipe dream” was to someday return to DTS to train others as I had been trained. However, after meeting a missionary to Thailand, that dream was changed to a strong desire to teach at the Bangkok Bible College. After arriving in Bangkok and taking a year of language study, the time came for my interview with the area director to determine my anticipated designation to BBC:

Larry – “David, I’m ready to begin teaching at the Bible school. When do I start?”

David – (laughing) “We have no policy to send new workers to the Bible school.”

Larry – “Then where will I be working?”

David – “If you really want to train nationals, you must first understand what ministering in rural Thailand is all about. We are going to send you to Lamnaria, Central Thailand.”

The core group of believers in Lamnaraï was leprosy patients who were at best semi-literate. They were not at all impressed with my degrees, nor were they overly enthusiastic when I preached

my expository sermons taken from outlines I had used in the states. They did, however, respond to stories. When a poster was pulled out or the JESUS Movie was started, I noticed a visible change in their demeanor. They would inch closer to the speaker or screen and seemed to hang on to every word. The most intense interest was reserved for the periodic visits we received from a Christian *likae* troupe.

Likae is a Thai dramatic and musical theatre production that is done on a stage in an open square or temple site. The first one I observed was performed by lay members of a rural church before four hundred captivated Thai. The actors, bedecked in colorful costumes, told the story of the Bible from Genesis to the Resurrection using traditional musical instruments, chants, songs, and dialogue. The climax was when a sequin encrusted Jesus (played by the best actor – a woman) was raised dramatically from the ground on a rough wooden cross. That dramatic moment proved to be a kind of cultural and missiological epiphany of sorts. For the first time I saw how powerful a culturally relevant narrative presentation can be. A story told with passion and drama does not need lengthy explanations of its meaning or application to life. I was surprised to find that theology and life applications are actually “imbedded” within stories.

After six years I was released to my “dream job” at the Bangkok Bible College. As an academic dean, I quickly learned how our status as an accredited school forced us to provide courses that matched the accepted western curriculum. Also, you teach as you were taught, which meant that our staff

transferred their western teaching style to a very different Thai learning style. Years later, when it was apparent that Thai churches were not receiving our graduates as we had expected, we did surveys to determine the cause. One underlying reason was that we were not matching our teaching style with Thai learning styles. Although officially a highly literate culture, Thailand at its core was an oral culture, which gravitated to narrative, drama, proverbs and music.

This educational mismatch was most pronounced when we took a young tribal convert, who grew up in a rural, illiterate area and transplanted them to our mega city where we taught them systematic theology in a classroom setting. After convincing them over three or four years of the “right” way to study and proclaim the Bible, we sent them back to their home village. Although they had our “coveted degree” they did not have the seniority, experience, or communication style that was accepted in the village.

After six years of church planting and six years of Bible teaching, I longed for a sabbatical in order to sort out my misgivings about Thai biblical education. It just so happened that Dr. Tom Steffen was starting a new class on Narrative at Biola University. This class came out of Dr. Steffen’s personal frustration while reaching the Ifugao tribe of the Philippines. Dr. Steffen said, “The Ifugao wanted stories and I gave them systematic theology, they wanted relationships and I gave them reasons, they wanted characters and I gave them categories.” (Steffen, 2005) Dr. Steffen reminded me that at least 65% of the Bible was narrative while only 10% was propositional. I discovered that 70% of the world either cannot read or prefer communicating using oral methods (Slack, 2005). A few classes with Dr. Steffen were sufficient to conclude that what was needed to reach the vast majority on our planet was a much better understanding of orality and the power of stories.

I had naturally gravitated to the 10% that was propositional in the Bible and had taught the Thai in the systematic and abstract way that I had been

taught. Overall the mission enterprise has done a fairly good job in reaching the literate portion of the unreached in the world through these means. However, what about the huge majority among the billions of unreached in our world that can be reached only through orality? In the Muslim world, for instance, women are largely illiterate and although the majority of men can read and write, they prefer oral channels of communication. My narrative course highlighted these factors and gave me a new direction for my doctoral studies.

With Dr. Steffen’s encouragement, I chose the Walk Thru the Bible approach as the subject for my thesis. The beginnings of the Walk Thru method can be traced back to 1963, when Ralph G. Braun began a home Bible study using a chronological approach, hand signs, and a map laid out in his living room. Braun called this unique method, An Old and New Testament Walk-Through (1970).

As a first year student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I had a chance to meet Bruce Wilkinson, who had taken Braun’s prototype and stretched it into a day-long teaching seminar he called Walk Thru the Bible. In 1975 I attended my first Walk Thru seminar with Bruce. I had taken survey courses in seminary, but none of them were able to put the Old Testament together so coherently in such a short time frame. Bruce was able to cover a 110-point outline of the Old Testament in six hours by placing us in the geography of the Middle East and physically moving us from point to point. I was intrigued at this approach but never realized the impact that the WTB method would have on my future ministry in Thailand.

While church planting in Central Thailand I was appalled at the level of biblical illiteracy among Thai lay leaders. This concern was only heightened when, as a teacher at the Bible college, I discovered students who were unable to piece together even a rudimentary picture of the plan of God as found in the Old and New Testaments. Steffen finds this to be a universal problem, "Bible training institutes often promote fragmentation . . . A fragmented grasp of the Bible often results in some people missing the big picture. Caught up in the details of

minutia, Bible students often fail to see God's overall plan" (1996: 45,46). This disjointed view of scripture by leaders has had a direct effect on the laity. A Thai leader commented, "Thai Christians are unable to put events in the Bible into any sort of a timeline. This negatively affects their ability to understand both sermons and in their own personal study" (Jaengmuk, 1992, 23).

Dr. Steffen had convinced me that a "missing link" in the training of Thai ministers was narrative storying of the Bible. WTB method was a time tested and international model, which put together all the best aspects of a narrative presentation. I wondered if the WTB method could be part of the answer to the Thai's disjointed and piecemeal understanding of the Bible? Would the Thai see it as a relevant seminar or just another novel "farang" (foreign) method, unsuited and untested in Thailand? There was only one-way to tell: translate the seminar, research the method and evaluate the results.

After seven years, forty seminars, numerous interviews and group testing in all parts of Thailand, I was able to publish my results. My initial hypothesis concerning the Thai's interest in narrative was substantiated – the Thai simply love stories. The way that WTB packages its presentation of the key stories in the Bible only enhances the Thai's natural propensity to narrative. Bruce Wilkinson describes it best in his own four point summary which he gave in an interview to Hunt and McCauley (1988): (a) Synthetic - gives an overview of the "forest" (broad sweep of Bible) with little stress on the "trees" (details); (b)Teacher accepts responsibility for the student's learning; (c)It is memorable - contains a variety of mnemonic aids, and (d)It's fun. My research allowed me to test these four aspects in the Thai context.

Synthetic

A simple test that I used on numerous occasions was to have 15-20 Thai stand in a line holding pictures of key Bible events. I would then ask them to rearrange the pictures in their proper chronological order. Most people are able to

identify isolated characters or stories from the Bible but are hopelessly lost when asked to put them in order. The WTB method creates mental pegs for major people, places and events of the Bible and arranges them in the right order. Instead of a disjointed line of confused Bible events, the participants in the seminar are given a composite picture of the whole with each piece placed in its proper chronological position.

Participatory

One thing I have learned from my study is the need to honor adult learners. The lecture method may be the most efficient in delivering volumes of material, but it does not engage the learner holistically. During a six-hour seminar it is especially important to keep the students actively involved. Wilhoit states, "Educational research has shown again and again that students learn best when they enter into class activities and take an active role in learning as the teacher does in teaching" (1990, 67). One key WTB activity is hand signs, which accompany each point in the outline. The Thai are highly expressive and graceful with their hands and take a special interest in this part of the seminar. Such hand signs, however, must be checked carefully to make sure they are appropriate. The book "Dos and Taboos Around the World" states that, "Gestures pack the power to punctuate, to dramatize, to speak a more colorful language than mere words. Yet, you may discover that those innocent winks and well-meaning nods are anything but universal" (1985, 39).

Memory Techniques

Oral cultures are able to memorize vast amounts of material. That is why we can talk of an "oral Bible" - a storehouse of from 50 to 120 key stories. A pastor or evangelist who masters these stories can apply them to a given situation at a moment's notice. The Old and New Testament outline of WTB has over 140 points, which can be memorized in just a few sessions. The Thai are taught from their youth to orally recite facts to their teachers in a group setting. This fits in nicely with an integral part of the seminar, repeating the outline out loud together. The outline and key words are reviewed

throughout the day through different oral and visual memory aids. To ensure variety, a teacher can choose from numerous review methods for group use and hand signs. Acrostics, songs, pictures and object lessons are all used to improve retention of the story line.

Fun

Without the element of fun, a six-hour seminar can become quite boring. This is especially true in Thailand, which is known as "The Land of Smiles." The concept of fun or enjoyment is a core Thai value that they call "*sanuk*." Mole gives this description, "Happiness seems to be the apex and sum of the other Thai qualities, values and behaviorism. It is descriptive of the uncompulsive enjoyment of life which is the ideal of the Thai" (1973, 85). Ukosakul (1994, 79) shows why it is important to maintain a "*sanuk*" atmosphere, "The concept of *sanuk* is closely tied with the level of interest in the activity at hand. If the Thai do anything and do not feel *sanuk*, they will become bored and have no desire to continue with it." As with gestures, cross-cultural humor is tricky and should be spontaneous and transparent, not contrived or canned.

Flexibility, Adaptability and Transferability.

People often ask me, "How long does it take to teach the Walk Thru?" I usually answer, "What length do you need? WTB is like a piece of sausage which can be cut to most any length." It is usually taught as a 5-6 hour seminar but can be reduced to 2 hours and 30 minutes if necessary. I have also expanded it to a forty hour TEE class. The adaptability of the method can be seen from the numerous cultures and climes it is taught in. In some places in Russia the handbook is only two pages long and the outline is cut in half due to a scarcity of materials and time. One innovative teacher in Australia taught the Old Testament to aboriginals using picture graphs hung on large sheets under the trees.

At least 50 participants are preferred to create group dynamics, but the seminar has been taught to only a handful or to thousands as at Willow Creek Community Church. WTB is easily translated

into other languages as evidenced by the over 40 languages and 85 countries in which it is taught. John Hoover describes further adaptations: "It is used as a tool in illiterate contexts (Africa); an evangelistic tool (Kenya); a church planting tool (India); a seeker sensitive tool (aboriginal tribesmen - Australia); a 77 step Thru the Bible (Russia) and a long-term curriculum tool (Ukraine)."

Twelve Signal Systems

In my studies I puzzled at how such an American method could be so effective in so many diverse countries. Often the outline and handbook was simply translated word by word from English and taught according to the American model. Yet people of different learning styles and ages have affirmed its cross-cultural appeal. Smith (1992, 144) in his study on the twelve signal systems of communication gave the most satisfying answer.

Smith maintains that all human communication occurs through twelve signal systems or "pipes." Using several signal systems in combination is similar to adding more pipes to a water system. A larger number of pipes carries more water. Similarly, each added signal system increases the information load carried. If one system fails to be understood, there is not a total loss of communication, because other signals systems are carrying the same or related information.

1. Verbal - speech (the majority of the six hour seminar is speaking).
2. Written - symbols (the manual has both text, charts and diagrams).
3. Numeric - numbers (periods of years and dates are mentioned).
4. Pictorial - two-dimensional (the manual, overheads and pictures).
5. Artifactual - three dimensional (object lessons).
6. Audio - nonverbal sounds and silence (music, reflection times).
7. Kinetic - body motions (hand signs).
8. Optical - light and color (the four color manual and overheads).
9. Tactile - touch (attendees sometimes give each other a back rub).

10. Spatial - utilization of space (layout of room as a map).

11. Temporal - utilization of time (schedule of the day, breaks, lunch).

12. Olfactory - taste and smell

WTB works cross-culturally because it uses eleven of the twelve pipes (exception: olfactory). In order to include all twelve pipes, Walk Thru at one point actually considered adding a “scratch and smell” page to the manual. Many teaching techniques are one-dimensional, stressing only one or two pipes. The broad appeal of WTB is found in the large number of teaching styles, which are bound to match at least some of the predominant learning styles in a given culture. This explains why a largely western method can “cross-over” into other cultures.

Another element which helps WTB adapt to other cultures is the emphasis that can be given to any one Bible story. When the life of Joseph is taught in the West, the most usual emphasis is placed on the sovereignty of God or forgiveness. However, in Buddhist Thailand a better stress would be on how Joseph responded to suffering. Gautama Buddha was seeking to find the source and solution to suffering. His answer was the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path. The scriptures give a much more satisfying answer to the problem of suffering and evil, which is why the life of Joseph can be used so effectively with Thai Buddhists. Another example is the book of Judges. The ending of the book, “Every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (21:25) fits with the Buddhist idea of working out your own salvation in your own way. The fallout from such a philosophy in the period of the Judges can be easily applied to the Buddhist context. Stories that speak to idolatry and slavery can be treated with a similar approach.

WTB has a basic story set that incorporates over 140 key people, events and locations. Such a story set is a good starting point for a generic panorama of the essential narrative elements. However, when working in an illiterate or semi-literate culture it is possible to contextualize the story set

to that specific people group. The basic process is as follows:

1. Study the language and culture and gain a grasp of their world view.
2. Develop a more exhaustive story list that address the key world view issues.
3. Narrow the full list down to around thirty key stories that touch on essential doctrines and truths.
4. Field test the story set for suitability.
5. Evaluate and debrief the results of field testing.
6. Finalize the story list and set up a training program.

Paul and Teresa Koehler who worked in India have a program which incorporates many positive aspects of effective training in storying (200???):

1. Participants sign up for a four-year program, which requires four days of residential training per month. In these four years the students will learn a total of 125 stories (Genesis – Acts 28)
2. During the four days of training the students learn from 8-10 stories. They study in groups of 4-5 students and practice telling the stories in groups of two. The content of the training is reduced to only one sheet of paper.
3. All participants present their stories and are evaluated by their teachers and peers.
4. In the three weeks between training sessions, the students share their stories as often as they can in a variety of settings – family, neighbors, in church and public places.
5. After three weeks they return for more training and stories. The group of 50 that are in this program have shared in as many as 3,000 different settings in a 21-day period.

For most of my missionary career, I unconsciously pushed a literate agenda and bias. The TEE and Bible school training I was involved with was heavily tied to the printed page and western thought patterns. The Thai went along with this

emphasis since they felt that western educational models with a stress on logical, abstract ideas and systematized learning were somehow more academic and thus superior. Their term of respect, “*ajarn*” (professor) substantiated my role as their enlightened western scholastic guru. Witnessing my first *likae* troupe, teaching the Walk Thru, and observing powerful church planting movements based on chronological teaching of bible stories has changed all that.

Larson popularized the idea that we enter a new culture as Learner, Trader and Storyteller (1978). Basically he was encouraging us to enter the culture in a learning mode and to strive to find acceptable roles and communication channels within the target group. In Thailand it is hard to follow that model since from the moment you arrive you are called “*ajarn*” (professor). This term is quite flattering and can subconsciously tempt the missionary to bypass the rather “infantile” stage of learner and story teller in order to portray oneself as a experienced scholar. As an “*ajarn*” the tendency is to communicate in the expected western mode of abstractions and ideas and thus overlook the unadorned power of a simple Bible story. As familiar as I am to being addressed by the Thai as “*ajarn*”, I would much prefer to be known by the Thai as “*phu laow reung*” - Story Teller.

By saying this, I do not in any way denigrate scholarship or dismiss literacy or Bible translation. We must proactively advance the great commission on all fronts: literate and illiterate. However, the vast majority of the unreached in the world fall within the oral 70%. If we are to reach this segment of our world, we must rebalance the scales by educating ourselves in the whole subject of orality. There is a major thrust to translate the scriptures for all peoples by the year 2025. This is a worthy and lofty goal. However, out of the over 5,000 living languages in the world, we have only 400 or so with complete Bibles. There are actually some ministries that are effectively “on hold” until sufficient work is done to secure written copies of the scriptures.

With this in mind, shouldn't we give an equal emphasis to securing an “oral Bible” for those languages that have a limited chance of seeing a written Bible? An oral Bible worked very well from Adam to Moses, the early church, and well into the Middle Ages. It is easy to forget that no country in the world had over 30% literacy before 1900. Although literacy has improved over the past century, we enter the 21st century with vast sections of the illiterate world still untouched. They will remain untouched unless we can accept the validity of oral Bibles and then seek to develop such Bibles for every illiterate ethne around this globe.

JOT Note: I miss Thailand. My work there was primarily with radio and film ministry. And I enjoyed visiting an audiocassette ministry studio in North Thailand that ministered to tribal people teaching them about the Bible.

I was delighted to work with a dedicated Thai team that produced radio programming and was dubbing films into Thai. Many years ago I heard about Larry Dinkins and his development of a Thai version of Walk Thru the Bible. Over the years that relationship has grown and now I can rejoice with Larry in his ministry and the spread of sharing Bible Stories. I still remember when a new translation of the Bible in “sidewalk” Thai came out that put the Bible in everyday Thai most could understand. Bible Storying continues to take on different forms appropriate for oral learners. It takes patience, repetition, participation, and honoring preferred communication styles. Larry has done well adapting Bible Storying to the Thai. My hat is off to those in other countries and peoples that are also making the Bible stories interesting, relational, understandable and memorable to their people.

J. O. Terry
Bible Storying Network
Biblestoryingnetwork@gmail.com