

**Stories are for adults:
Equipping preachers to communicate
Biblical narratives to adult audiences.**

J. Kent Edwards,
Talbot School of Theology

The use of narrative passages of scripture need not be limited to ‘bible stories for children.’ This paper will argue that the unique learning characteristics of adult learners contained in D.A. Kolb’s “experiential learning cycle,” make biblical narratives especially valuable for preaching to adult audiences. This paper also suggests that students trained to employ this writers ‘story shaping’ homiletical methodology, will be equipped to effectively proclaim the stories of scripture to adults.

Every parent and grandparent understands the universal attraction that stories have for children. Every day and all across the globe youngsters ask the adults in their lives: ‘will you read me a story?’ Early childhood educators have long recognized that a child’s predilection for narrative can be harnessed as a learning tool. Wise parents – and Sunday school teachers - have used stories to teach children. Christian education in the evangelical church has long – and wisely – capitalized upon Children’s innate love for stories to instruct them about the person and work of God. We teach children bible stories because they love stories. But children are not the only ones interested in stories.

Stories burst generational boundaries. All age groups enjoy a good story. The healthy sales of airport novels, movie tickets, DVD rentals, and cable TV packages testify to the intergenerational appeal of narrative. Every marketer in America knows that adults enjoy stories. But what many do not realize is that stories have the potential to be far more than just brain candy for adults. Stories can also be used as effective educational vehicle.

There is a growing recognition today of the instructional value of stories for mature learners. The once undervalued story is being increasingly viewed as an effective educational tool. The growing respect for teaching adults through story can be seen in at least two areas: the business world and the counseling office.

The business community is using stories to teach business principles. Spencer Johnson, M.D. has written ten international bestselling books including three #1 bestsellers. No business book has been better received, however, than his parabolic book, “Who Moved my Cheese.” This simple story sold over 10 million copies in the first two years of its release. Amazon.com declared that ‘Who Moved my Cheese,’ was its #1 all-time bestselling book. The influence of Johnson’s narrative based approach to business leadership is not limited to North America. The New York Times Book Review reported in a 2005 article that ‘Who Moved My Cheese?’ is China's all time bestselling translated

work with official sales of over two million copies to date. In Japan, ‘Who Moved My Cheese?’ sold over 4,500,000 copies to become the #1 bestselling book in Japan's history by a non-Japanese author.¹ All around the world, the adult business community has resonated with the simple story of Johnson’s book.

The counseling community also recognizes the educational value of stories. Books such as *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*,² *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in a Postmodern World*³ and *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*⁴ all encourage therapists to help their clients view their lives as stories. This narrative approach assists hurting people to view their lives as a grand story and, in the process, understand how their life story was shaped in the past and how they can be re-shaped in the future. Christian counselor John Trent encourages a similar process in his book *LifeMapping*.⁵ These authors and therapists believe that stories are an appropriate and beneficial vehicles for adults to gain an increased understanding of their lives and environments. Adults are being taught how to live healthy lives through the use of stories. Adults learn from stories. To understand why stories are such an effective teaching tool for adults, it is necessary to understand how adults learn.

Of all the adult learning theorists in print today, perhaps none is as highly regarded as Malcolm S. Knowles. Knowles groundbreaking book *The Adult Learner*⁶ pointed out that “traditionally, we have known more about how animals learn than about how children learn; and we know much more about how children learn than about how adults learn.”⁷ Knowles set out to correct this problem by distinguishing between ‘pedagogy’ the art and science of how children learn and ‘andragogy’ the art and science of helping adults learn. This educator considered it a mistake for an instructor to treat adult learners as large children. Knowles spent his professional life arguing that teachers should recognize adults as unique learners and alter the learning experience accordingly. In what way are adult learners unique? Knowles principles for adult learning could be summarized as follows.

1. A need for relevance. Adults need to know why they need to learn something. An understanding of the practical application of what is being learned is essential.
2. A readiness to learn. Adults come ready to take what they learn and immediately apply it to life.

¹ www.whomovedmycheese.com - accessed Monday, July 31, 2006

² Michael White & David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990)

³ Allan Parry & Robert E. Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in a Postmodern World* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994)

⁴ Jill Freedman & Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)

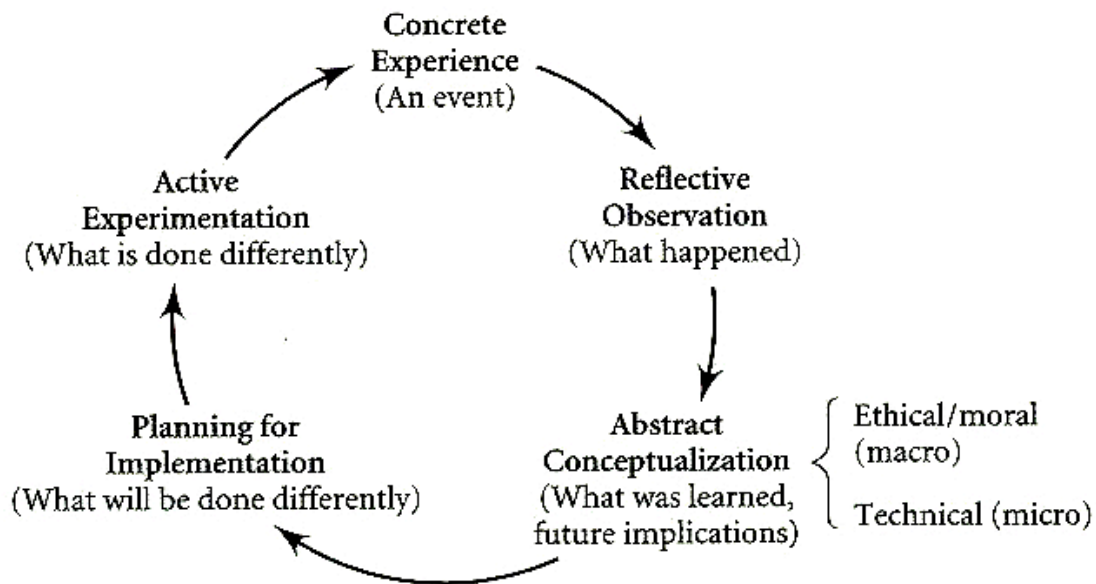
⁵ John Trent, *LifeMapping*, (Focus on the Family Publishing: Colorado Springs, 1994)

⁶ Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III & Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner – 5th edition*, (Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998)

⁷ *ibid* p. 18

3. A need for engagement. Adults want to be self-directed learners who are active participants in their learning experiences. Adults are not willing to passively memorize and regurgitate content that some 'expert' says that they should know.
4. An appreciation of prior life experience. Adult learners want their life experiences be recognized and resourced for learning.
5. Internally motivated. Adults value education because of how it will positively impact their quality of life. External motivators become less important.

In his book *Experiential Learning*⁸, David A Kolb outlined a theory of education that addresses the unique needs of the adult learner identified by Knowles. Kolb developed a simple and effective approach to andragogy that is relevant to everyone involved in the teaching of adults. An approach outlined in the diagram below.⁹



Kolb's model for adult education is an appropriate andragogical response to the characteristics of adult learners outlined by Knowles. In the above model, the teacher begins with a concrete event in the life of the student. For the adult learner, this approach immediately establishes relevance and creates a situation in which the student is motivated to learn the material. In addition, this problem centered starting point affirms the adult learners past experiences and explains why it is in the learner's best interest to fully engage in the learning process. This 'case-study' approach to education is a highly effective adult education model that is currently being utilized by some of the most respected adult-oriented educational institutions today.

⁸ David A Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984)

⁹ Sharan B. Merriam & Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* – 2nd edition, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999)

One of the highest profile academic institutions to utilize Kolb's andrological teaching methodology is the Harvard Business School. According to their web site,

“About 80 percent of the classes in the MBA program are taught via the case method, a practical approach to learning where students work under the guidance of a faculty member to address real business problems in all their innate complexity and ambiguity.”¹⁰

Case study education typically begins with a story. The instructor uses narrative to describe an actual or true to life situation and encourages the students to identify the relevant issues and suggest a resolution to be applied to the problem. Narrative is a powerful educational tool for the adult learner. This is especially true when the narrative used by the instructor is drawn directly out of or is obviously related to the experience of the student. By examining the narrative of a concrete 'slice of life,' the student can follow Kolb's cycle and engage in reflective observation, identify what concepts were learned through the event, plan what to do differently as a result of the lessons learned, and then implement those lessons.

Those of us who preach to adults can learn a great deal from adult educational theorists. When we preach we want those listening to us to learn and apply God's word to their lives. In order to accomplish this objective with adults, we would be wise to include narrative sermons from the narrative portions of Scripture in our preaching repertoire. The stories of scripture have the potential to be relevant, enjoyable and educationally significant for the adult listener. How can we preachers ensure that the narrative sermons we preach reach their potential? How can we release the full benefit of the Bible's narrative literature for our adult listeners?

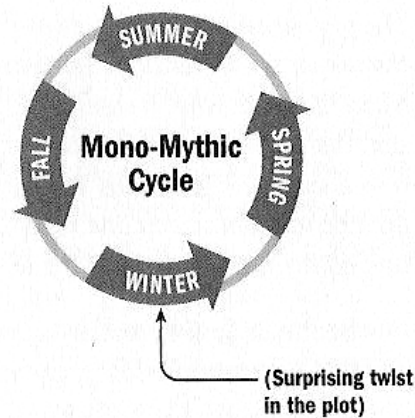
While there are a number of effective, genre sensitive homiletical forms available to the contemporary preacher, I have found that many narrative homiletical forms have a limited usefulness. You can, for example, only preach so many first-person sermons in a year. I have found, however, that a homiletical form I have called 'Life Shaping'¹¹ to be a highly effective 'meat and potatoes' homiletical approach for the preaching of biblical narratives. 'Life Shaping' sermons can be used on a regular basis and retain their ability to educate adults while maintaining a high level of interest. As you will see, this homiletical approach applies Knowles andrological observations in a Kolb-compatible format.

The first step in preaching a 'Story Shaping' sermon is to interpret a biblical narrative from a literary perspective. Preachers who do not understand the literary dynamics of how the biblical writer fashioned his biblical story, will not understand the theological point the original author was making in the story, or how to harness the literary power of the original story in their sermons. While scores of books have been written on the

¹⁰ <http://www.hbs.edu/mba/hbsadvantage> accessed August 1, 2006

¹¹ J. Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) p.128-132

literary dynamics of biblical narrative, perhaps the most important factor is the shape of the story. As I have argued elsewhere, the mono-mythic cycle is a helpful tool that preachers can use to determine a story's shape.¹²

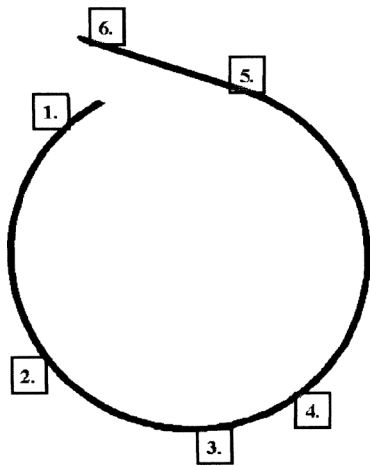


Since conflict is inherently interesting, stories start with an inciting event. Something goes wrong with the summertime perfection we would all prefer. Stories spend most of their time exploring the increasing complications that occur as negative events unfold. As far as the protagonist is concerned, life is getting colder and colder – worse and worse. While a few biblical stories end in winter (these are called tragedies) most don't. The vast majority of biblical narratives enjoy a sudden reversal – a surprising twist in the plot that starts to return life back to the bliss of summer. Stories do not have points. They make a single point. This point is revealed in the surprising twist – the moment of 'aha' when the solution to the problem is revealed.

The point of a biblical story is always a theological point. We learn something about God and how to live in response to him when we understand a biblical story. The narrative literature of the bible is concretized theology. The stories of Scripture examine abstract theological truths through the lens of real life situations. Properly understood, biblical narratives discuss theology in an adult learner oriented 'case study' approach.

'Story Shaping' sermons are an attempt to harness the natural advantages of narrative literature for the benefit of the adult listener. As the diagram below indicates, this sermon form shamelessly piggybacks upon the structure of the biblical narrative while intentionally intertwining the lives of the listeners with the problem faced by the biblical protagonist. If this is done successfully, the problem of the biblical protagonist becomes the problem of the contemporary listener. As a result, the listener looks with interest at the critical choice made by the biblical protagonist makes to resolve their ancient problem – and decides whether to follow the protagonists' example in their own contemporary situation.

¹² *ibid* p. 41-56.



‘Story Shaping’ is a homiletical attempt to reshape the story of our listener’s lives with the lives of the biblical narratives. Here is how it works.

1. Personal identification with biblical character

Your sermon begins in the 'summer' of the narrative. Your goal in this portion of your sermon is to help your audience identify with the biblical character. Build bridges between the biblical character and your audience. You want your audience to discover the ways in which their lives are linked to the lives of the biblical character. It may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Who is this person?
- Where do they live?
- What is their background, education level, profession and social standing?
- In what ways are they like my audience?

2. Cultivate the awareness that characters in stories (biblical and contemporary) can and must make choices.

As you relate the 'fall' difficulties being faced by the biblical character, show the parallel pressures in the life of your congregation. Biblical characters were real people. You want your congregation to 'feel' the same tension and pressure that the biblical hero felt leading up to her/his decision. Harness this pressure to help your audience to recognize that we cannot avoid making choices. The following questions will help clarify your thoughts.

- Is the biblical character a victim or a victimizer? Of whom / what?
- Does the character display a sense of powerlessness?
- Have you (or someone you know) ever felt the same way?

Take time to go through the biblical story scene by scene outlining the parallels between protagonists story and the life story of the listeners. As you do, be sure to preserve the inherent tension of the story. If there is no tension / conflict in your sermon there will be no interest. If there is no interest there will be no life change.

3. Help your congregation to understand *what* the biblical character decided and *why* they made these choices.

At this point, you are in the winter of the biblical story. Things have become unbearable and the character has chosen to act. You are at the bottom of the mono-mythic circle, the climax of the emotion. Here you are looking for the biblical character's psychological motivation. What would have made this decision difficult?

- When did the character finally choose to act?
- Why not earlier or later?
- What decision did they make?
- Why did they finally choose to act?
- What factors motivated them to act the way that they did? (e.g. social, physical, spiritual, etc.)

4. Emotional identification with the consequences that biblical character faced as a result of their choices

At phase #4, the diagram above curves upward. It assumes that you are preaching a biblical story that has a happy ending. These 'comedic' stories are best used to show audiences how godly decisions result in restored lives.

But while many biblical stories end as positively as Daniel's, this is not a universally true. Characters such as Samson, Saul, and Absalom did not make God-honoring decisions. The lesson of their lives is negative. We are not to imitate their decisions.

Regardless of whether the biblical narrative you are preaching ends up or down, however, help your congregation slip into the sandals of the biblical character that just made the decision. God-honoring decisions have a real and often immediate impact upon the life story of the decision maker. Allow your congregation to see this.

- What happened to the character when the choice was made?
- What happened to those around the character? (friends, family, members of the community)
- If the character could have gone back in time and re-written their life story, do you think that they would have made a different decision?
- Have you ever faced / made a similar decision to the biblical character? Did you face similar consequences? Why?
- Would the consequences experienced by the biblical character likely follow a similar decision today? Why?

5. Decide whether to emulate (parrot) or avoid the choices and consequences endured by the biblical characters

Let your congregation have a good look at the benefits of the God-honoring choices. Allow them to gaze on the ripple effect that those decisions had on their family, friends and community and then bring them to the point of decision. Exhort your congregation to learn from the mistakes and successes of the heroes of Scripture.

- What is holding you back from making a God-honoring decision today?
- What are the pressures you face to imitate / reject the decision of the biblical character?
- How will your life be changed by your choice? What will happen to *your* story?

- How would the stories of *others* (e.g. your family, friends, church community) respond to and be affected by your decision to imitate the biblical character?

6. Alter behavior in accordance with the decision.

As a caring pastor, you know many of the issues with which the people in your congregation are struggling. Give them specific examples of what the application of this passage might look like in their lives. Concretely outline how their actions might be different as a result of their choice. Challenge them to implement the lessons from this text into their lives immediately and to tell someone about their decision to do so.¹³

The ‘Story Shaping’ sermon form does not make six different points. It proceeds through six stages to make sure that the listeners understand the single theological point of the narrative passage, and how that point influences the life story of the listener. As you make your way through the sermon you will weave in and out of the ancient and modern worlds – explaining the text so that your listeners appreciate the depth of the problem the biblical protagonist faced, and explaining how your listeners will face very similar tensions in their lives. You want to do your best to stitch these worlds together into a seamless and unified sermon.

‘Story Shaping’ sermons have many advantages for the adult listeners. First, because they are stories, adults enjoy listening to them. We pay good money to listen to a good story! Second, because they are delivered in the 3rd person, and the vast majority of biblical narratives are written in the 3rd person, they are inherently more compatible with the narratives of Scripture. Thirdly, because they are delivered in the 3rd person, they are considered more appropriate in a greater number of venues than less traditional sermon forms. Even the most traditional settings I have preached in have enjoyed ‘Story Shaping’ sermons. Fourthly, ‘Story Shaping’ sermons address Malcolm Knowles characteristics of the adult learner.

1. A need for relevance. As the listeners identify with the issue of the biblical protagonist, the understanding of the practical relevance of the message is obvious and compelling.
2. A readiness to learn. Since the relevance of the sermon is clear, adults are eager to learn.
3. A need for engagement. As adults re-live the experience of the protagonist and wrestle with the decision to make, their desire to be self-directed learners is satisfied. Adults are not being asked to passively memorize and regurgitate content that some ‘expert’ says that they should know. They are figuring out how to make their way through life.
4. An appreciation of prior life experience. In order to apply envelop the adult learner in ‘Story Shaping’ sermon, preachers are forced to recognize and resource the life experiences of their audience.

¹³ Adapted from J. Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005)

5. Internally motivated. Adults value education because of how it will positively impact their quality of life. With this homiletic form, the listener is forced to examine how the lives of the biblical protagonist were benefited or harmed by his/her choices. The link between application of theological truth and quality of life is obvious.

A fifth advantage that ‘Story Shaping’ sermons have for the adult listener is their correspondence to David A. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model. If Kolb is correct that experience is the best source for adult learning, then ‘Story Shaping’ sermons are an ideal way to help adults learn the truths of Scripture. As Kolb’s model suggests, this sermon begins with a ‘Concrete Experience’, a historical event found in Scripture that is then related to similar concrete experiences in the lives of the adult listeners. As the preacher and listeners examine the biblical account scene by scene, they are engaging in what Kolb referred to as ‘Reflective Observation.’ The question being asked here is “what happened?” When the ‘Story Shaping’ preacher identifies the theological truth contained in the surprising twist in the plot (the moment of ‘aha’) Kolb’s ‘Abstract Conceptualization’ has occurred. The preacher and listener identify together what was learned and begin to think about the future applications of this theological principle. When the preacher moves towards challenging the listener to decide whether they will emulate or eschew the principle revealed in the actions of the protagonist they are moving into Kolb’s ‘Planning for Implementation,’ what will be done differently stage of learning. While the final stage of the learning cycle, ‘Active Experimentation’ or what is actually done differently can usually only be achieved outside of the sermon setting, the ‘Story Shaping’ sermon has made a significant contribution to the transformation of the lives of the adult listeners.

‘Story Shaping’ sermons are theological case studies. These messages present real-life situations very similar to our own presented by the preacher for adult learners to analyze and learn from. They harness one the best adult educational models available today.

Children may like stories, but the stories of Scripture need not and should not be limited to the very young. Stories are a valuable tool for the instruction and spiritual transformation of adult learners. In the opinion of this writer, the ‘Story Shaping’ homiletical form is an interesting and educationally effective way to communicate the narrative portions of Scripture. This homiletical form has the potential to be a highly effective tool for the proclamation of the biblical narratives. Teaching ‘Story Shaping’ in our classes could benefit our students and the churches they serve.