

STORIES

I have always loved to hear stories or read them. Growing up with a teacher as mother and a frustrated scholar as father, there were lots of books in our house—plenty of stories. When the uncles and aunts came, as they often did, I listened to them tell more stories, about hunting, fishing and happenings. Many of us have had similar involvements and we may have repeated some of the stories—as best we could remember them, perhaps embellished.

When we lived among the Kewa people in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, I heard many stories from the men and analyzed some. I also benefited from publications by several anthropologists who studied Kewa stories. There were a number of themes that ran through the stories:

- The value of pigs, including a super-pig
- Interaction with animals: cassowaries, pigs, snakes, birds
- Ghosts, spirits and wild-men
- Yakili, Sky-people and their exploits
- Old men, little men, and trickswereaters
- Skin changing people
- Brothers and sisters
- Women and possums, snakes and husbands
- Journeys to other-worlds
- Festivals and dances
- Fighting and battles, often over land

Initially, I didn't think seriously about the stories, considering them mostly legends of the ancestors. Gradually I came to see that the stories contained analogies, dim and distant as they were, to my Christian faith. There was, for example, references to Yakili, a supreme sky being who could provide the people with good fortune. He (or it) did not require sacrifices and was not a harmful or vengeful spirit. The value of animals, certain trees, and land was prevalent in the stories and I began to connect the Kewa values with ones in the Bible. Why were there some similarities and analogies?

If I could have read the recent book by Louis Markos called *The Myth Made Fact*, it would have helped me. Of course, it wasn't available, but Don Richardson's *Eternity in their Hearts* (Baker, 1981) and *Peace Child* (Bethany, 1976) did help by providing a perspective that missionaries can easily ignore—cultural analogies that point to God and Christ.

Markos explores how reading Greek and Roman Mythology--pagan legends—often previews some degree of revelation about God. Markos is explaining in more detail of what C.S. Lewis reminded us of in "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock* (1970).

Storing stories is apparently how our brain is wired. A storyteller links a story inextricably to his or her imagination. C.S. Lewis described the process he utilized in writing as follows:

One thing I am sure of. All my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first, they were not a story, just pictures. (Hooper, ed. 1982:53)

For Lewis some of the pictures had a common flavor, almost a common smell, one that grouped them together. His advice to the storyteller is to be patient so that the images can begin to join. Lewis says that if we are fortunate (*"I have never been so lucky,"* he says), we may find a whole set joined consistently to form a complete story. Usually, however, there are gaps in the story and the storyteller has to do some deliberate inventing. This includes deciding why certain characters appear in the story with certain actions. Lewis concludes by saying, *"I have no idea if this is the usual way of writing stories, still less whether it is the best. However, in the experience of Lewis, images always came first."*

Jesus was the consummate storyteller (we refer to his stories most often as "parables"). He implied theology, but he left it to the hearer to determine what to do after hearing the story (*"He who has ears to hear..."*). Often even his disciples were puzzled and could not immediately figure out what Jesus meant. For us, commentaries tell us, or argue about, what Jesus implied. However, it seems that when Jesus told stories he expected them to be retold.

It is not surprising that stories are the primary way that people pass on or seek information—according to some literacy experts, up to seventy percent of the world's population depend upon oral communication as their primary source. In such cases, stories inform the society, even if the people do not have them in written form and, of course, thousands of language groups do not have any written materials. In such cases, people often tell their stories in some other dominant language.

Stories can be memorized and told "word for word" from the Bible, or they can be dramatized with cultural background and supplementary Bible information added. The important lesson for us to remember is that in every culture there are storytellers and we want them to retell the Gospel story—in their own language.

Karl Franklin
Learning from stories