LEADING WITH STORY

CULTIVATING CHRIST-CENTERED LEADERS IN A STORYCENTRIC GENERATION



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with Tim Brannagan

Leading with Story: Cultivating Christ-centered Leaders in a Storycentric Generation
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THE POWER OF STORY

Several years ago, my wife Tina and I visited Broadway to see the musical *Wicked*. This show, a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*, tells the story of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, and her early history in the land of Oz. Born with an unnatural shade of green skin, Elphaba is misunderstood and ostracized. When she goes off to school, she ends up rooming with the popular Galinda, later to become The Good Witch. Galinda inspires Elphaba to travel to the Emerald City to meet the Wizard. Elphaba's only desire is to work with the Wizard, the Great and Powerful Oz. Of course, as we already know, the Wizard is not so great and powerful. He is, in fact, a fraud who turns out to be the most insidious sort of evil there is.

The matinee show we attended was packed. The story and the music were superb, and the message was riveting, filled with life lessons. Yet no one stood up at the end and said, "There are four points you ought to learn and should apply." Tina and I left with just the story stirring in our hearts and minds. We went to Starbucks and discussed it over our Caramel Macchiato and Mocha Frappuccino®.

Could it be that good and evil are often perceptions, we wondered. Is true goodness found in being true to oneself? What are the potentially negative ramifications of turning from worldly power to pursue a purer, nobler path? Powerful lessons of integrity, influence, truth, authenticity, and reconciliation were a part of our discussion. All from a musical. From a drama. From a *story*.

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ENCOUNTER WITH STORYCENTRIC LEARNING

Indonesia

I was educated and trained in the United States, so reason and logic dominated my approach to vocational ministry. My initial interaction with storycentric learners occurred in 1984, when my family served as missionaries in Indonesia. My first assignment was to teach in our denomination's seminary. Since we were the new kids in town, we were assigned the courses no one else wanted to teach—one of which happened to be preaching. At least it was a course I thought I knew something about.

I taught sermon preparation in the school while listening to Indonesians preach in the local church. The church we attended was filled mostly with professional, educated Indonesians. The vast majority of our church was literate. Most of the students from the seminary went to this church. The pastor's sermons week to week were a lot like ones I'd heard and given in the US: he would present important truths intended to change how people think and how they make decisions. The sermons contained solid biblical precepts presented in several points. Sometimes he would sprinkle in a couple of quotes or illustrations for good measure.

The trouble was, the sermons in the church weren't doing much for the people in the community. There seemed to be little growth and change in how our people lived out their faith or how they reached out to others for Christ.

I noticed a different style of communication when I attended Indonesian social events. Whenever community leaders wanted to relay important information to their people, they used stories. As afternoon turned to evening and as the sun was setting, the village leaders would bring out an old bedsheet and hang it between two poles. A light was placed behind the sheet. The storyteller would use the backlit shadow of leather *wayang* puppets to create a drama.

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In the darkness of night, the puppets and the stories came to life. The people—children and adults—would sit and watch and listen and laugh and learn for hours together. These puppets and their stories impacted people in ways that three-point sermons could not. The *wayang* theater reached the people's hearts. The stories they told were personal and memorable.

During that same time period, I listened to a recorded lecture series by Dr. Fred Craddock on "Preaching as Storytelling."[1] In 1996, *Newsweek Magazine* recognized Craddock as one of America's best preachers—partly because he is a master storyteller. In his Princeton lectures, Craddock posed a question: "Is there room for

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the story to serve as a major vehicle for communicating truth?" His question intrigued me.

I thought I would try it out. When I was asked to preach at our local Indonesian church, I took a cue from the culture and from Craddock and decided to experiment with story. I related biblical truth through a story about a man who died and entered the afterlife. The reaction from the congregation was totally unexpected—dozens responded to Christ! This was a formal church that was not accustomed to outward expression, and the Indonesian leaders' reaction was also totally unexpected. They said my presentation wasn't preaching, and it wasn't "how we do things here." They had learned well from the missionaries before me.

About a year later, the elders asked me to preach again, and again I told a story. This time I relayed the life of Caleb from the Old Testament book of Joshua. I told of how Caleb had made good choices as a young man and his choices prepared him for great things in his later years. I simply told the Scripture-based story, and not even very well. Again the people responded in extraordinary ways. As I closed the service in prayer, one man stood, raised both hands, and ran to the altar. Many others followed. All responding to God's grace served up in a story.

That was my first conscious awareness of storycentric learning. It was my first taste of the power of story as an adult. As a child, I grew up in a culture of storytellers. My father, who was an accountant, loved to tell me stories—many of the same ones his father had told *him*. The preachers of my childhood were also storytellers. In the South, where I was raised, preachers would preach to the poor, sitting on folding chairs, under tents, on floors of sawdust in wheat fields. By the power of their stories, the whole scene was changed. The streets were paved with gold. There was pearl and chandaliers all around. We were transported in space and time. God's truth served up in a story.

I didn't know much about the power of storycentric learning back then; I had only experienced it. What made me keenly aware of storycentric learning occurred years later within the Lausanne Movement.

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The Lausanne Movement

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, more commonly known as the Lausanne Movement, is a global network that mobilizes evangelical leaders to collaborate for world evangelization. The stated vision is "the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." This is a great goal.

I served on the Lausanne leadership team. As we were preparing for the Lausanne 2010 Cape Town Congress, a study was commissioned to identify the key needs of the global church. This study uncovered a lack of substantial leadership development for ministry leaders among the majority of the world's people; those who learn best through a storycentric approach were not engaged. As Chair of the Leadership Development Working Group, I was troubled by this study.

Soon thereafter Freedom to Lead International (FTL) was launched to address this need. FTL cultivates Christ-centered leaders through story, symbol, and song to unleash the whole gospel in local communities. We seek to influence storycentric learners with the leadership principles and practices of Jesus. Part Four provides more explanation of FTL's work, but let me first tell you another part of my story.

Madhupur

Soon after the launch of FTL, I travelled to Madhupur in northeast India. This is the home of the Santali tribe, a people group of approximately eight million in which the predominant religion is Hinduism. My host for this trip was Samir, founder of a church-planting ministry among the Santalis. Samir's ministry has established a strong beachhead of churches. During my visit, I observed Samir and his colleague, Gautam, teach one of Freedom to Lead's storycentric modules entitled "Leadership for a Healthy Ministry" to eighteen of the Santali church leaders. All of these leaders are either semi-literate or nonliterate. As Samir and Gautam taught the leadership principles, they used biblical stories, as well

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