Narrating Selves:
New Theories of Self in Story-Based Religious Education

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Abstract

Contemporary neuroscience challenges an understanding of the self as a discrete, integrated, and unitary entity (Donald, 2001; Edelman, 2004; and Varela, 1999). It sees the self as *emergent* rather than unchanging and *social* rather than individual. The self is not an entity contained in time and space; it is a quality that emerges from almost infinitely complex neural interactions (Edelman, 2004). The self is not pre-given; it does not exist prior to experience. It is continually constituted and re-constituted through and within experience. And furthermore, the self is not isolated within an individual, solitary mind. Selves are social creations—socially constructed and socially mediated.

This theory of selfhood has profound implications for education, including story-based religious education. I propose that understanding the self as emergent and socially constituted calls for different educational approaches—approaches that are themselves emergent and socially constituted. Religious educators must be willing to let stories play in and with the learners' imaginations—not to uncover universal and timeless truths nor to uncover true selves—but in the belief that, through engaging with story, learners might open up new possibilities for themselves in compassionate relation with the human and more-than-human world.

Beginning

Contemporary neuroscience challenges an understanding of the self as a discrete, integrated, and unitary entity (Donald, 2001; Edelman, 2004; and Varela, 1999). It sees the self as *emergent* rather than unchanging and *social* rather than individual. The self is not an entity contained in time and space; it is a quality that emerges from almost infinitely complex neural interactions (Edelman, 2004). The self is not pre-given; it does not exist prior to experience. It is continually constituted and re-constituted through and within experience. And furthermore, the self is not isolated within an individual, solitary mind. Selves are social creations—socially constructed and socially mediated.

This theory of selfhood has profound implications for education, including religious education. But it is hard to come to terms with, perhaps because it is so different from our everyday experience of self. In the pages that follow, I will first elaborate the theory of self that neuroscientists propose. Then, I will consider the implications for story-based religious education. I will suggest that understanding the self as emergent and socially constituted calls for different educational approaches—approaches that are themselves emergent and socially constituted.

A New Theory of Self

What is this property we call "the self?" I sit at my computer, my hands on the keyboard, determined to keep my attention on this paper. But my mind flits around, refusing to rest in this single moment. I look back at what I have written and wonder how it will be read by other religious educators; I am distracted by a noise; I recall a conversation with a friend; then my thoughts leap ahead to plans for the day. The mind is indeed a restless creature.

Neuropsychologist Merlin Donald (2001) notes that our window of conscious awareness is very small indeed, at most fifteen seconds. Consciousness is very vulnerable to distraction (an ancient reflex that prevents us getting so absorbed in our thoughts that we ignore imminent danger). At any time, we can attend to only a tiny fraction of the experiential possibilities available to us. What is more, all our mental processes occur in a constantly changing matrix of neural interconnections. The brain has no permanent storage capacity—just the ever-changing flow of electrical and chemical messages passed from one neuron (brain cell) to another. As Donald notes, "The miracle of human life is that it seems as coherent as it does" (p. 25).

Yet, in our everyday experience, we have a perception of coherence and continuity, of a unitary self that is consistent in time and space. Typically, we do not forget where we are or who we are. We may fall asleep, losing conscious awareness for a time; but when we awake, we find ourselves where we left off—in the same place, in the same time. More importantly, we find our *self* where we left off, along with the sense of being the same person. However, this self that seems so stable and tangible turns out to be more illusive.

Cognitive scientists have never succeeded in locating a *homunculus*—that "little person" in the mind that was once thought to govern consciousness. As Gerald Edelman (2004) explains, tens of billions of individual neurons create unimaginably complex neural networks; but there is no homunculus or anything like it. No central processor or master cell directs the show. The neurons self-organize. Whatever one does with little-people-in-the-brain metaphors for the self, eventually one gets to the level of neurons, which are "as lacking in inner life or point of view as

a kidney or a kneecap" (Hofstadter & Dennett, 1981, p. 12). It is astonishing to consider how something as complex, diverse, and multifaceted as a unique human personality, a self, emerges from utterly non-conscious cells.

The key to the emergence of the self is language and the capacity that language gives to tell stories. The self is a narrative construction (Donald, 2001; Edelman, 2004; Varela, 1999). Each person's self is continuously narrated and revised out of fragments of experience into a consistent whole. Without narrative, including encounter with the narrative of others, higher order consciousness is impossible (e.g., Donald, 2001).

It can be thought of this way: Last night, as I sat in a coffee shop with a friend, my senses were bombarded by sights, sounds, colours, tastes, smells, and textures—redness, sweetness, roughness. These are what philosophers call *qualia*—the tiny units of perception that make up an overall experience. As is normal, I perceived only about one millionth of the perceptual possibilities available to me. Perception is selective. I noticed the taste of coffee, the hum of the air conditioner, my friend's description of an event. But because my attention was focused elsewhere, the remaining 999,999,999 other possibilities went unnoticed. Yet what I did perceive was no random jumble. My consciousness wove the qualia into a narrative whole that I experienced as seamless and continuous, and that I now recall as an evening with my friend.

Such ongoing self-narrative is an imaginative construction. It is somewhat arbitrary, in that it is based on what I actually perceived, as opposed to what I might have noticed. Furthermore, it is conditioned by past experiences (Edelman, 2004). Another person would not perceive what I perceived and would not bring the same past experiences; they would not tell the same story.

This ongoing self-narrative, added to and amended through ongoing experience, is what Donald (2001) calls "autobiographical memory" (p. 205). As Donald explains, experiences are continually integrated into the complex, unfolding story we tell ourselves about where we have been and who we are.

Kerby (1991) shows how language has a constitutive role in self-formation. Persons know themselves only after and through the fact of self-expression. The past is narrated into a whole through the selective, imaginative, and reconstructive nature of memory. Life is inherently of a narrative structure, a structure that we make explicit when we reflect upon our past and our possible future, he says. Through this ongoing self-narration, we create and re-create ourselves. Kerby proposes that it is as a character in our own or other people's narratives that we achieve an identity.

The self is not fictitious, however. Self-narration is both receptive and creative: It is based in sensory-motor experience, but created in the imagination. The "truth" of self-narrative is found not in an absolute sense but in the sense of a good fit. It is true if it works; it is true if it is useful and adaptive (Kerby, 1991).

Language allows us to differentiate and clarify experience, making possible complex thought, use of symbols, and autobiographical memory. However, an isolated human being will never develop language or indeed symbolic thought of any kind (Donald, 2001). A child deprived of language in a critical developmental period will never develop the neural interactions necessary for symbolic thought and, most significantly, will never develop a fully human conscious self. Interaction with other human beings shapes not just awareness but the very architecture of the human brain. A self cannot come into being without deep enculturation. A conscious mind is thus part of a larger cultural whole. The development of one's self-narrative rides in tandem with encountering narratives of others.

Educational Implications

The educational implications of this theory of self have been noted by educational theorists who show that encounters with fictional and literary narrative play an important role in the development of consciousness and self-identity (e.g., Luce-Kapler, 1999; Sumara, 1996). Through imaginative encounter with other narratives, including fictional ones, worlds of possibility open for the individual. Engagement with literary narrative enables us to experiment with different identities and enlarge our sense of what is possible. Such experiences may lead to an active reconfiguration of the individual's sense of self (Iser, 1974, 1978; Luce-Kapler, 2004; Sumara, 1996, 2002).

Sumara (2002) points out that personal identities are not discovered, they are made. People do not gain insight by studying themselves but by "studying the details of other people's experience" (p. 155). Sumara says that readers of novels can experience strong identification with characters, providing unique opportunities to generate meaning in readers' lives.

The indeterminacy of fiction, as Iser (1974, 1978) has shown, requires the reader to engage imaginatively with the text to fill in the gaps and to picture what is not written. This picturing process is an interpretive one, he says: "It is the guess of the beholder that tests the medley of forms and colours for coherent meaning, crystallizing it into a shape when a consistent meaning has been found" (1974, pp. 283-284). Thus, meanings are not fixed in the text but emerge from a creative engagement between reader and text. The meanings are different with each reader and with every reading. Hence, says Iser, we are creating and recreating meaning, and ourselves, in the act of reading.

As educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2004) observes, meaning making is the heart of educational experience, as learners seek to make sense of their experiences and develop an understanding of who they are in relation to the world. In Greene's view, learning is going beyond—going beyond our selves to discover enlarged personal possibilities, and going beyond the world as it is in order to "look things as if they could be otherwise" (1988, p. 3). Imaginative encounter with other stories makes it possible to posit alternative realities. It is this, Greene says, that empowers learners to "create and re-create a common world" (1988, p. 23).

Thus, learning entails a kind of narrative reconstruction—the rewriting of stories. The story we tell ourselves can be rewritten with enlarged meanings and possibilities. Just as we re-create our selves through the sharing of stories, we also re-create our world. The narrative fixtures of culture—the seemingly inalterable myths and traditions that hold the status quo in place—can also be re-imagined, transformed.

Imagination is essential in Greene's vision of education. The story must be engaged, as in any aesthetic encounter, with eyes open to wonder and possibility. It must be permitted to play in and with and through the learner's own imagination. As Kathleen O'Gorman observes, "For Maxine [Greene], creativity and imagination are the quintessential human capacities and contributions to the world. They are the means and consequences of inspiration, emancipation, and transformation" (1998, p. 236).

Applications in Story-Based Religious Education

Religious education has tended to undervalue and even mistrust the role of the imagination, especially when it comes to encountering the sacred stories of its tradition. Story

has been used more often to point to eternal truths or evoke moral imperatives than to create new meanings. It is my experience, in 25 years of religious curriculum editorial work, that thematic and moral imperatives, rather than imagination, tend to drive the use of story in Christian religious education. This applies whether one looks right, left, or centre. Stories are hemmed in by themes and purpose: to illustrate an ethic of caring, to proscribe certain behaviour. They are further constrained by past interpretations or fears of misinterpretations. Rarely, even in story-based approaches, are sacred stories given room to play freely with the learners' imaginations.

Of course, there are exceptions. Certainly Thomas Groome's (1980) pedagogy, in which the learners' personal stories engage in dialogue with biblical stories and the stories of others, underlines the importance of narrative encounter in religious education. More recently, Leona English points to the use of story, especially children's literature, to enhance learners' religious imaginations and to help them discover new ways of seeing and being in the world. She says that the development of the imagination is vital if we are "to envision the universe in a way that is truly respectful of humans as creations of God in the world" (1998, p. 23).

Religious educators must be willing to let our sacred texts play. As Greene (2001) would implore, we must spend enough time with stories to notice what is there to be noticed, to let the familiar become strange and the strange, familiar. We must take stories out of the boxes imposed by learning objectives, themes or prior interpretations and let learners engage imaginatively. We must trust learners to transform the meanings of stories, releasing their power to shape us as faith communities and as human selves.

But trusting learners with stories does not come easily. I recall one meeting of an international curriculum partnership at which a curriculum specialist attended to express concerns about the process. "Learners cannot be trusted to do their own interpretation of sacred stories," she protested. "What if they come up with wrong interpretations?" In her view, all interpretive work should be left to the experts, the theologians.

I disagree. I think stories should be handed over freely to communities of interpreters. To those who worry about relativism, I suggest that this is not anything-goes individualism, but the profound encounter of one story with another in community. Personally, I am less fearful of interpretations coming from learners engaging with a story in community than I am of interpretations by those who claim to know with certainty the meaning of a sacred text. Surely all the schisms and exclusions, missiles and missions would make us wary of any claim to "right" interpretation. Surely it is time to embrace what Johnson-Eilola calls postmodernism's "tentative local agreements" (1998, p. 205). Such understandings are tentative, in the sense of self-consciously partial, incomplete, cautious. They are local, in the sense that they are developed within a particular time and place, with no claim to universality.

Just as we must let go of modernism's grand narratives and universal claims, we must also let go of the idea of the self as a grand master of the human show. We must accept the conscious self as tentative and partial, a "local agreement" of sorts. The self is one possibility, one narrative among many.

Religious education curricula have typically taken a more deterministic approach to the development of the self. I recall goals that would have learners "fulfil their innate potential" or discover their "true" (and by implication "unchanging") selves. Religious education stories become vehicles for developing a self that is understood as a discrete entity. These stories become tools for moving learners through stages of moral or faith development. But if there is not one self, but many possibilities, religious education can no longer be a linear process, moving the learner through fixed stages. Rather education must become an interplay of stories.

Just as meaning emerges through encounters of story with story, so the self emerges through and in community. If we enable learning communities to face what Varela calls the "relative fragility" of the self's narrative construction (1999, p. 61), learners may be helped to move beyond thinking of selves only in ego-centred terms. They may begin to experience the self not as a private entity but as a community process. As Varela explains, this necessarily connects the self to others, to life, because language is social by its very nature. Thus, the narrative self becomes a bridge between the individual and that individual's society.

The self, in its very essence, is a bridge between one and others. Thus it can be said that the self is a relation. Carter Heyward (1982) argues that God is not merely encountered *within* relationships, but that God *is* the relation. I suggest, with Varela, that the same is true of the self. Not the self discovered in relationship, but the self *as* relation.

The self, seen in this way, becomes a community possibility, an unfolding narrative opening into infinite possibilities for mutual relationship with the human and more than human world. The following example illustrates how this might unfold in a story-based educational approach.

I spent several sessions with a group of children aged four to five telling and retelling the story of Noah's ark from Genesis, in picture books (Brett, 2003; Spier, 1977; & Spirin, 2004) and using wooden figures. Then I invited the children to retell the story (which is to say, interpret it for themselves) using the figures. While playing with the figures, the children encountered their big theological question: What about all the *other* animals that didn't get onto the ark? The children faltered, but not for long. In true midrashic tradition, they answered their question by elaborating the story. They concluded that there must have been lots of other arks to rescue all the animals. And it was here that their narrative took its most interesting turn. Here, where their own stories intersected with Noah's story, they became ark builders. They got out Lego, built arks, and saved the animals. Animals they knew personally entered the story—pets they loved, a wild animal once glimpsed, a horse from another story. Their self-narrations merged with sacred story.

This illustrates several important points. First, it shows what wisdom can emerge when stories are entrusted to learning communities. I believe that these insights and meanings could not have developed without the interaction of learners with one another and with the story. The children needed to play out the story in order to consider the implications and develop the question that sparked their quest for a new story. They needed to play together to find a truth that fitted their own experience, a "local agreement" that integrated their past experiences of love and care for animals.

Second, this exemplifies the way our storied selves interrelate and are transformed in communities of storytellers. The children's sense of themselves changed as they became builders of arks and savers of animals. New possibilities emerged for relation with one another and the world. New connections with sacred Other too, as they refused an image of God-who-leaves-animals-behind and entered the story to care for the creatures.

And third, this incident reminds me how important it is to engage creatively with story. This story was freed to play and be played with in the children's imagination. There was space for it to change as their understanding changed. It was given to them, neither to uncover universal and timeless truths nor to uncover true selves, but so they might open up new possibilities for selves in compassionate relation with the human and more-than-human world.

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