

## **Using Life Story Narratives in Religious Education**

Christian stories provide the central and distinctive structure and content of the Christian faith...stories do not merely decorate or illustrate, but provide the substance of faith. The better one understands the Christian stories, the better one understands the Christian faith. (Tilley, 1990, xvii)

### **An Introduction: Or Nobody Cares Who the Pharisees Were.**

Let me begin, I think appropriately, by telling a story, a story about my life as a religious educator. Over the last decade I have had a lot of experience in writing religious education curriculum materials for use in what would be called in Australia secondary schools, that is Years 7 through 12. This has ranged from course outlines, notes for teachers and, perhaps the pinnacle of this type of work, student textbooks. A number of years ago I was approached by a synod of the Uniting Church in southern Australia to write a curriculum frameworks for use in their high schools. First some background points: The Uniting Church in Australia came into being in the late 1970's as a union of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. For those familiar with the Canadian religious landscape it is remarkably similar, in history and outlook, to the United Church of Canada. As thumbnail sketch it is fair to describe the Uniting Church as theologically liberal with a much decentralized conception of authority.

Schools in Australia fall into three broad categories. The first are fully funded government schools. The second are Catholic schools, which received about 80% of their funding from government sources. The third category, into which Uniting Church

schools fall, are called independent schools. These schools receive relatively little government funding. Amongst Uniting Church schools a distinction can be made between old, prestigious and expensive schools, akin to the British public schools and newer ones, often built on the periphery of major towns and who charge, by independent school standard, modest fees. It is to this second type of Uniting Church school that the religious education curriculum project was directed. The older schools, like many Ivy League colleges, had moved well and truly beyond their denominational origins and did not see the need for any structured religious or moral education.

Our brief was to produce what amounted to a series of detailed lesson plans for religious studies teachers working in the newer independent Uniting Church schools. There were a number of features of the assignment which were both stimulating and challenging. Religious studies had rarely been a part of the curriculum in these schools and had to fight hard to get space on an already crowded curriculum. It was allocated a small fraction of the time given to other subject disciplines. In addition students had little history of having studying anything approximating religious studies in their earlier years. The teachers themselves lacking specialist training in the background disciplines that form the basis of religious studies, and although not hostile to the discipline lacked the confidence that was evident in the way they taught other subjects. In this sense they were little different from teachers of religious education in other school settings (Rymarz and Engebretson, 2005).

Most of the students in these schools had a nominal Christian affiliation, although a good number were non Christian or had the most tenuous Christian lineage. The students themselves represented well the spiritual and religious characteristics of Gen Y (Mason, Singelton and Webber, 2007). This study described youth today as being consumers in a religious marketplace, where options abound and no one metanarrative has any strong or decisive hold. Many of the students in Uniting Church schools were also well described as being in stage III of Callum Brown's three fold model of familial secularization (Brown, 2006). Here grandparents represent a well socialized religious sub group. Their children have some residual connection with faith based groups but the grandchildren are almost totally secular in their worldview. Secular here refers to the modified sense of the term, which sees religious belief and practice as something private, personal and tolerated as long it does not move into the public sphere or become a serious and transformative commitment (Dobbelaere, 1981; Yamane, 1997).

As there was no previous curriculum framework we had a "clean slate" to develop our program (Rymarz and Scanlon, 2005). We had freedom in another regard, because of its decentralized nature the Uniting Church often lacks a definitive teaching sense and a number of differing positions can all fall within a legitimate expression of Church teaching. Pedagogically this raises a number of issues as it is often a little easier to begin the presentation of a topic with some foundational statements which express the stance taken by a particular faith tradition. For example, take a topic like interpretation of scripture. Working within the Catholic tradition it is relatively easy to find statements

from authoritative sources which set out how scripture should be seen from the perspective of that tradition. (As an aside in order to deal with this ambiguity we decided to use the work of a prominent Uniting Church theologian as our magisterial guide. If disputes arose, her work became our benchmark for what the Uniting Church taught).

Let me look at one of the units we developed which has special significance for this discussion of the use of narrative. This was entitled “Getting to know more about Jesus”. In consultation with schools authorities, one of the goals of the religious studies program was to acquaint students with some of the key beliefs and individuals of the Christian tradition. Students had some ideas about Jesus but these tended to be vague and unsystematic. We allocated 6 lessons to this topic. It is well to remember that for the whole years about thirty lessons were given to religious studies in the curriculum, so we broke this down into 5 or 6 units. The approach we took initially to teach about Jesus could be described as historico critical (Buchanan, (2005); Walshe, 2005; Claerhour and Declercq (1970)). This was derived from the contemporary study of scripture which tries to place Jesus in a historical context. So we had lots of activities about where Jesus would have lived, what the countryside that he moved about in would have looked like, who were some of the people he came into contact with – included here was a very detailed worksheet, that I was particularly proud of, on who the Pharisees were and what they did. I do not wish to labour the point but I hope I am conveying here a fairly conventional approach to teaching about Jesus. We reasoned that after all the students had little knowledge about Jesus so our job as educators was, essentially, to provide some background. To use the jargon, scaffolding for later learning.

When we came to evaluate our work in a number of trial schools, the results were, to say the least, sobering. The framework had failed to inspire either the teachers or the students. Despite our best efforts students were not interested at all in getting to know about the historical Jesus. For the sake of brevity I will truncate the story of how we tried to address this situation somewhat. One blind alley we went down was to provide more detail, believing that the problem was insufficient information or not enough stimulating activities based on the core material we had provided. In hindsight this was a little like thinking that a person in a headlock would enjoy the experience a little more if we just squeezed harder. Several other remedial strategies were pursued with mixed results until a revolutionary idea was trialed. Rather than focusing on what Christians believed in an abstract sense we asked a person to speak about her Christian beliefs. This was before we had heard of Ricoeur's notion of narrative having a quasi-juridical aspect because one of its main functions is not to describe but to convince (Ricoeur, 1980).

We invited a former student of the school to talk about her Christian beliefs, with special reference to Jesus. The impact this had on the audience was remarkable. She spoke about her life, what she believed in, how this shaped what she did on a daily basis, she spoke about her hopes and fears for the future, she spoke about who Jesus was for her. It was like a curtain had been lifted, the palpable boredom of the previous program had been replaced by a willingness to listen and engage. The young woman was clear, articulate concise and stimulating. She spoke for about 15 minutes and on the basis of her presentation we crafted the unit. Her story gave us a beginning and an end as we set the

context for her talk and a further exploration after it. Most critically the students found her story captivating because it was an authentic and a real story told by a living, breathing Christian about her life had been shaped. Remember this was not an audience of actively religious students. But there was something about hearing a story from a person who was not too dissimilar to them, who had not so long ago sat where they were sitting and who now gave an account about how she lived her life and what was important to her. Most importantly she was able to distill the key features about who Jesus was and to present this in a powerful way, much better than a purely historico-critical presentation could. This life story narrative became the basis of our unit. It was not possible, of course, to use this young woman, in every school setting but by writing out her story and using other visual aids we were able to capture the essence of her message and continue to use it as our core.

This experience, as they say, got me thinking. What was it about a life story narrative that changed the learning environment from passivity to one where the learners were much more engaged, one where they asked questions and seemed to take a far more active part? Could this experience be used to inform my own teaching which was often directed to similar goals, that is, passing on a potentially large amount of information to an audience of varying interest and motivation?

## **The Tertiary Setting**

I have spent much of my university career teaching units that could be described as religious studies or theology 101. The goal here is to give students an overview of what the Catholic tradition maintains, although the arguments that I will make here easily apply to any person who is teaching an introductory course in a specific faith tradition. The students who take these courses are often motivated by the perfectly understandable goal of having to pass this course in order for them to achieve some type of professional registration such as being qualified to teach in a Catholic school. What I would like to explore here is the use of narrative to help make the teaching of these courses a more memorable and educationally sound experience for students.

After my experience with the Uniting Church schools religious studies curriculum I began to wonder weather some of the lessons I had learned here could be applied to my regular teaching work. I found that use of narrative life stories greatly enhanced my, and the students, perception of the quality of the learning environment. To summarize I think stories assist in teaching by; stimulating interest, by establishing a firm platform for future learning, allowing for further exploration in a variety of ways that can be tailored to the learners interests, capturing the essential points and presenting these in a way that stimulates learning, by setting contrasting ideas against each other in a way that encourages dialogue. To illustrate these points let me give an example of the use of a life story narrative in an introductory theology course. This narrative was used in the section on conscience and morality. The aims of the course were to introduce students to

concepts such as objective morality, development of conscience and natural law. In the past these had been taught in a relatively didactic way, which place great emphasis on presenting clear definitions of these concepts from a Catholic moral perspective. The student evaluations of the course were reasonable but certainly not outstanding so a new perspective was justified. In selecting this narrative I realized that the contrasting stories made for powerful reading and I choose to construct the narratives in a way that pointed toward a further exploration by students of the core objectives of the course, that is thinking about the development and nature of conscience and how these are seen in a Catholic context.

### **The Story of Two Franz's**

Franz Jagerstatter was born in 1907. He was a farmer, married with three daughters, and lived in the village of St Radegund in Upper Austria. He took his Catholicism seriously as a matter of personal conviction. When the Nazi's took over his country he loathed the new regime. He found the Nazi's an abomination. He decided to have nothing to do with them. This lost him some friends but this did not concern him. It was far more serious when he was drafted into the army. Being a soldier contradicted everything he believed in – being a soldier fighting for Hitler was even worse. He refused to swear a military oath and so become involved in the Nazi war effort. In Germany there was no provision for conscientious objectors, that is, those who did not want to fight in the war. The penalty for refusal was death. And that is what happened to Franz Jagerstatter. Despite



pleas from many sources, beatings and torture, he refused to swear the oath and serve a regime he knew to be wrong. He was beheaded in 1943. In 2007 he was beatified as a martyr of God. Jagerstatter's story was largely unknown until a journalist researching a different topic stumbled upon it in the late 1950's.

Franz Stangl was born in 1908 in Altmunster a small town in Austria. By the 1930's he was working as a provincial policeman. He was unhappy with his job and regarded his path to career advancement blocked by superiors who did not recognize his talents. Around this time Stangl became a Nazi. He saw this as an opportunity to get a new and better job, although there were some aspects of the Nazi program he knew to be wrong. When he joined the party he had to renounce his allegiance to the Catholic Church. This did not really trouble him because he was not a religious man, although he chose not to discuss his decision at any length with his wife because he knew that it upset her and she challenged him about it. Soon he had a new job, which in the early stages, however, disturbed him. He was working in the impressively named *General Foundation for Institutional Care* in a special unit known as the T4. Part of his job was identifying people in the community whom the Nazis described as burdens to the state, such as those with intellectual disabilities. Eventually he was asked to participate in their murder. This troubled him. Killing people was wrong, the people identified by T4 were innocent. He thought about his actions and came up with reasons to support what he was doing and eventually killing the weak and defenceless no longer troubled him.

Soon Stangl had a different job. In his new post he was the Commandant of the Treblinka death camp. Here hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed. Stangl escaped justice at the end of the war. In 1968 he was eventually tracked down living in Brazil and returned to Germany and was tried. Those people who interviewed him were amazed at his attitude. He did not seem to have any personal regrets about being involved in some of the greatest crimes in history. He blamed others for his actions. Stangl died in prison.

I have presented here only the barest bones of the narratives that were used. This skeleton was elaborated on with, for example, stories about the priest who tried to get Jagerstatter to change his mind and serve in the army and thus save his life, the prosecutor who interviewed Stangl in jail, the testimony of both wives about what their husbands were like to live with. These narratives set the stage for thinking and discussion that go to the heart of the topics being presented. For examples issues such as, how did Jagerstatter follow his conscience? How do you think he was regarded by other members of his community? When teaching about formation of conscience and the like one of the inherent difficulties is to get across the concept that conscience is like an organic entity, that it can grow and strengthen by reception of virtue and putting these into practice. Conversely it can also wither to almost nothing. By providing a human expression to this notion learning can be greatly facilitated.

Narratives also allow for a more purposeful investigation on the part of the students, especially if the topic is challenging and difficult. If their interest has been aroused then

activities such as asking student to investigate the concept of heroic virtue has some meaning because they have been presented with an exemplar of such behaviour. More imaginative pedagogy can be used such as asking students to write reflective pieces on what they think Jagerstatter and Stangl were like as teenagers. Further examples could be given but the point I want to stress here is that the contrasting life stories narratives provide a very powerful base on which creative teaching and learning can emerge. The narrative provides both interest and content in an appealing and unthreatening manner. The quality of the narrative is however, critical. This is where the role of the teacher is vital. It is primarily their job to come up with narratives which at once stimulates student and also open up complex and challenging concepts for them to explore further. What the teacher is doing here is assisting the student to think about otherwise difficult topics in ways that allow them to develop, their potential. To extend them but not beyond their capacity, especially with material they may be unfamiliar with.

Some may see this emphasis on narrative as a return to the heavily experiential approach to religious education that was prevalent, certainly in Catholic circles, in the decades following the Second Vatican Council (Martin, 1983; Turner, 1992). One of the key differences here is that the use of narrative is structured in a way to maximize student interest and hence involvement and is part of a much wider pedagogical approach. The story is part of the teaching and learning process but it is not the only part. Students are encouraged to move beyond the purely experiential and into a more cognitive understanding of the issues presented. Stories are a tool in the learning process because they can be very effective but they are augmented by other approaches.

## **A Theoretical Base for Use of Narrative**

Crites (1971) in his classic essay argues that stories are so effective on a number of levels because human experience is inherently narrative in form. We respond to stories because this is how we make sense of the world. One of the key factors of life story narratives that make them a useful tool in teaching is that all people are familiar with them and as a result are inherently engaged. This is hard to define in a rigorous way, but a story about a life has the potential to engage the hearer in ways that other types of presentations do not (Rubenstein, 1999; Fisher and Frey, 2007; Simmons, 2007). As Metz (1973, 85-86) points out one of the reasons why narrative can be so compelling is that, unlike other forms of communication, it is expansive and does not leave too much out. This is not to say that all stories are interesting, but some and especially those that deal with human life do have an almost intrinsic appeal (Niebuhr, 1989). I would argue that the contrasting stories of Jagerstatter and Stangl do stimulate an interest in the listener because of the almost tangible quality of the narrative. In one sense there stories are extreme but they resonate with the reader because in the actions of the protagonists the scope of the human dimension is fully covered. Their lives are reflective of a tumultuous time in human history and they parallel each other in many ways. Both were Austrians, they had the same first name, they were about the same age and both had to respond to circumstances most of us, hopefully, will never face. This sets up a platform for further enquiry, generated largely from students. The stories of both men lend

themselves to further questions and investigations. In the case of Jagerstatter, for example, further work reveals that he was not as one of my students put it, “the life of the party”. He was an intense man, not well liked and to use another metaphor well used to marching to the beat of his own drum. He had the disconcerting habit of following closely his personal convictions. Further investigations reveal a somewhat mysterious and chequered youth marked by some type of conversion experience and following this an austere Christian life. Narrative is not the only thing, it needs to be contextualized lest it become the experiential learning that typified religious studies in the 1970’s but the key here is to use the narrative as a way of helping the student into a proximal zone where they are stimulated but not left abandoned. Some structure needs to be provided. Just as talking about Jesus had a beginning and an end talking about the Franz’s should be rooted in a moral theology that contextualizes conscience and judgment.

The idea of providing students with directed instruction, in this case in the form of a structured life narrative, as a prelude to a more spontaneous learning dynamic is well captured in some contemporary learning theory, notably in the writings of Vygotsky and his followers (Karpov, 2003). Vygotsky made a distinction between what he called spontaneous and scientific concepts in learning. Spontaneous concepts are the result of generalizations based on typical human experience. Many of these are, however, incorrect. A person, for example, may conclude that the sun disappears at sunset and transforms into the moon. By contrast scientific concepts are those that arise from the generalized experience of humanity, for example, the laws of thermodynamics, and can be verified in some fashion. The scientific concept allows the student to see the world in

a new way or to restructure and raise spontaneous concepts to a new level. In contrast to other theorists Vygotsky held that student should not be expected to discovery these scientific concepts by their own devices. Rather the role of the teacher was to extend the student by providing enough structure in the form of instruction to allow students to use their new knowledge to reappraise their experience and prior learning. Vygotsky expresses this idea in the following terms, “scientific concepts...just start their development, rather than finish it, at a moment when the student learns the term or word-meaning denoting the new concept” (Vygotsky, 1987, 220). If we can see some overlap between scientific concepts and the acquisition of technical theological concepts then we have a proposal that may assist students in acquiring the necessary language to be able to, on a firm footing, understand, judge and decide. No one could be expected, for example, on the basis of hearing the stories of Jagerstatter and Stangl to come up with the formal definitions on the relationship, in Catholic terms, between morality and conscience. Whilst this is not a scientific concept in the strictly Vygotskian sense in that it cannot be verified, it does represent a significant example of mediated language learning. A student who is presented with this information in an appropriate manner is much better able to stand outside of their experience and to become an independent thinker rather than one who is entirely dependent on sensate data and reflection either private or communal.

Vygotsky favoured presenting students with structured assistance to help them acquire foundational scientific concepts. Students could also receive this type of assistance, in the form of a structured life narrative, in understanding complex ideas, within the Catholic tradition, such as the development of conscience (Mooney, 2000, 83). There is

no impediment then for a clear, concise and confident presentation of major Catholic ideas, mindful always of the recognizing the importance of the human pedagogical element. This is not, of course, the end of understanding. Rather it empowers the learner to make some type of judgment about what the tradition has to offer and how it sees itself. In Lonergan's terms it may well set off the movement through levels of consciousness (Lonergan, 1974). The critical notion is how the narrative assists the learner to move through a series of understandings each time acquiring a stronger appreciation for the concepts being presented.

Implicit here is the idea that the learning potential of the student is far greater than in other developmental approaches (Brown and Ferrara, 1985, 273-305). With the correct interplay between teacher, student and the community of learners, students knowledge can be greatly enhanced. The key to utilizing the learning potential of the student is to place them in a strong learning environment which at once challenges them but does not frustrate them. In Vygotskian language this is called the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Chaiklin, 2003). This can be defined broadly as the distance between the most difficult independent problem solving task a student can do alone and the most difficult problem-solving task a student can do with adult guidance (Vygotsky, 1978).

The adult or older mentor has a critical role to play in learning, they must be able to respond to the needs of students by , on the one hand, not excluding them from the learning process by making them passive recipients and on the other from requiring too much of them (Wertsch, 1985, 67). There teacher's role in crafting the narrative is

critical. They have the knowledge of the capacities and interests of those in the class and also the necessary background and skill to develop the instructional narrative. The quality of the narrative is critical in helping students become more familiar with challenging and in some cases new concepts. Narrative are a good way of engaging students and are not seen as a type of one-sided dialogue where the teacher presents the story, imperious to the needs and background of the students, and then moves onto another topic. The idea of the learning community is of value here as the narrative unites the efforts of the teacher and the student toward a common goal, in this case a greater understanding of the underlying concepts that have inspired the use of the narrative.

To conclude I think the value of narrative in religious education is further enhanced because it allows teachers to engage students on topics that may otherwise be neglected because they are too hard or controversial. The narrative allows a certain cognitive space to develop around all those involved in the teaching and learning process (Coles, 2004). A major difficulty in religious and theological education today is the need to provide students with integrated and coherent courses of study, ones that do not shy away from contentious issues. By using narratives those in the learning community are invited to enter into dialogue about some of these issues through the perspective of story, which is a useful way of creating a distance between the issues and the personal perspective of the student. The story of Jagerstatter, for example, allows for an entrée into the whole question of moral law and the demands that it places on people by using the example of one who was prepared to live by this law. From a Catholic perspective too it offers what has always been an important teaching tool – the lives of the saints as a way of explain



the core teachings of the tradition. This is not the final word on the topic but it does allow for some type of cognitive scaffold to be erected one that can be used in later sessions to develop, integrate and expand the concept.

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