

A truth beyond telling

By Cassidy Dale

Is the quest for faith like science, a search for irreducible truth? Or is it like art, a search to express something that is beyond telling?

A parable about languages

It's things like this that haunt me at night, rearing up their heads at that moment between blariness and sleep, like the nose of a nightmare coming over a hill. Mysteries, danger, faith, hope and love ^ or the memories of these ^ all can haunt you.

Haunting me is a three-year-old memory. It happened during an evangelism conference -- three days of tag-team preaching to the choir. At the end of the first day, I met the evangelists for dinner in the lobby of the Adam's Mark Hotel in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The Adam's Mark is one of those holdovers from the glory days of Big Tobacco. You could almost see the ghosts of Southern gentlemen laughing and smoking cigars in the lobby. Very Rat Pack. The chrome on the edges of the place had peeled off decades ago but was pasted back on in a last-ditch attempt to make the corpse live again. It didn't work.

You have to sneak up on the future in a place like this, even though sometimes it hides in plain sight.

Dinner was at a round table. White tablecloth. Pale wicker baskets of warm rolls brought by paler hands with fingernails the color of clotted blood. The evangelists traded preacher jokes and football analogies and reminisced about the good home cooking they don't get in Michigan. The rolls kept coming while the kitchen juggled more orders than it had had in a month.

Waitresses listen. I've learned that much. And ours was listening to us. She was a postmodern chick in postmodern chic - black, horn-rimmed glasses, the dyed, dark red hair. Hers was a survivor's beauty. Maybe 25 years old, she was trying to finish school, get a solid job, do something.

She was already on a spiritual journey. I could see it behind her eyes. The Spirit was already with her, flowing around her, and she couldn't make sense of it. She was Jacob wrestling with her own angel.

To figure it out, she was probably going to bookstores rather than church. She will likely find her way all on her own. In the emerging culture, people often look for God by themselves, not at church.

I know all this because I'm just like her. She knew it and I knew it. We recognized each other. Water flows to water.

Christians haven't had a lot to offer people like us, postmoderns on a faith journey. My dinner friends were evangelists -- bridge-builders to those who need Christ. But they -- we -- had nothing to say to this waitress.

Clearly we didn't speak her cultural language. But the distance between us was further than just that. Her story is entirely, fundamentally different from ours as believers. Her relationship with God ^ how she pursues God and how God pursues her ^ is very different from what we talk about in our churches and our evangelism classes. I remember looking at this waitress and thinking, She is my people and we have little for her.

What is she looking for? What does she have already going on within her? How is she struggling with the conversations she's already having with God? How is God relating to her already?

Sometimes churches change their methods when they see the people in the emerging culture around them and realize „We don't speak their language. Some churches update their terminology, change their worship style, or add contemporary music to the service.

But the difference runs deeper than that. It's the different languages of two distinct approaches to God -- the language of mysticism and the language of doctrine.

Mysticism

The source of an unwritten language

Walter Truett Anderson, in *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, says there are two basic kinds of religion in today's world -- exoteric religions and esoteric religions. Exoteric religions emphasize doctrine. Esoteric religions emphasize mystery.

Exoteric religions assert that God can be found within the absolute truths of doctrine and dogma. Esoteric religions find God within mystical spirituality. Exoteric religions are passionate about the law of God. Esoteric religions are passionate about the awe of God.

For several centuries, those of us in the Western world have lived in cultures geared to the exoteric. So Christians have learned to express their faith in exoteric ways to fit the modern world.

But there is an emerging culture on the horizon, and in many ways it is already here, that finds the modern way of experiencing and describing the world -- through reason, science and doctrine -- an inadequate language for the spiritual content of life.

Modern Western culture assumed that religion, like science, was a search for irreducible, unchanging truths about the universe and God. This emerging

culture, which currently carries the label postmodern, instead assumes that religion is like art, a search to express something that is beyond telling.

For people in the emerging culture, religion is about getting a handle on spiritual experiences and the relationships we have with God. The Bible is a book that renders the spiritually wonderful finally speakable. It's the successful but mysterious writings of a mostly unwritten language - the language of the soul.

In this emerging culture, many people seek an esoteric relationship with God. But most Christian churches still offer only exoteric beliefs about God.

These esoteric seekers understand they live in a shrinking world. Globalism has made neighbors of faith groups that once never knew each other existed. Doctrines and dogmas rub uncomfortably against one another.

Since postmoderns seek what is beneath absolute truth (or what is common among all absolute truths), they find mystical approaches to spirituality more trustworthy than the truth assertions of exoteric religions.

For them, the search for God is an esoteric endeavor - a search for transformational mystical encounters with the divine. They are seeking something to feed their souls rather than to fill their rational minds.

Postmodern seekers want an experience of God, an encounter with the depth, beauty, awe and wonder of the sacred. Thus they are drawn to the study and practice of the monastic Christian disciplines of contemplative prayer and chant, the connection with nature found in Celtic Christianity, and the celebration of charismatic worship and various New Age practices.

These seekers find the exoteric fundamentalisms of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions to be spiritually unsatisfying at best and, at worst, capable of genocide.

No religion is purely esoteric or exoteric, emphasizing only the extremes at either end of the continuum. Esoteric religions sometimes develop dogma and exoteric religions occasionally tolerate mystics.

But it might be fair to say that whereas churches once thought unchurched people were atheists, now churches can assume that unchurched people are more likely to be mystics.

Art

The spirit of an unwritten language

Works of art speak in an esoteric language. Art itself is an attempt to read and write in the unwritten language of the soul, the symbols of the mind, the textures of the senses, the sounds of our being. As a result, many people look to music, movies and art -- not to science texts and theological treatises -- for spiritual guidance and maps of human interaction with God.

As a result, artists - especially popular ones - sometimes function as the theologians of the day. Bono, of the rock supergroup U2, is considered by many to be one of the most influential theologians alive today. Likewise, German film director Wim Wenders of the Angels-in-Berlin movies *Wings of Desire* and *Faraway, So Close* is viewed as a theological shaper. Yet neither Bono nor Wenders would claim to be theologians!

Bono expresses his own esoteric journey with God in his introduction to the book *Selections from the Book of Psalms*:

Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do. They introduced me to God, not belief in God, more an experiential sense of God. Over art, literature, reason, the way into my spirit was a combination of words and music. As a result the Book of Psalms always felt open to me and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the book of John. My religion could not be fiction but it had to transcend facts. It could be mystical, but not mythical and definitely not ritual.

Postmoderns seek ways for God to enter their spirits rather than their heads. Solid thinking shapes the journey. A God-sensitive heart senses the presence of God. The spirit hears the whispered guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is an esoteric gospel ^ the book of John. It's the gospel that reveals the mystical meanings of Jesus, life and ministry. John's gospel functions like art. The other three gospels read more like newspaper reports.

Stories

The vocabulary of an unwritten language

When the world becomes too big, too complex or too wonderful to explain through rational means, we use stories. We help ourselves understand something by creating stories and analogies.

Our esoteric spiritual journeys and relationships with God are often too wonderful to describe with rational definitions. All too often, we struggle for ways to describe them even to ourselves.

The stories in the Bible help us locate ourselves in our soul travels. Sometimes we find ourselves experiencing something like the blindness of Paul during his transformation. Sometimes we are like Jacob wrestling in the night. Sometimes we are like Joshua beholding the Promised Land for the first time.

Jesus went out into the wilderness for 40 days and nights and came back with a vision of something. He came back with an awe of God not experienced before. He had a mystical encounter with God and came back with a mystical spirituality. Just like all other mystics, Jesus had no ready vocabulary to describe what he

saw, heard, felt and experienced. So he became an artist, attempting to render the unspeakable into stories ^ his art medium.

He created analogies and told stories all the rest of his life, always trying to tell the story that would open a window for others to breathe in the air of the Divine Beyond. Too wonderful to define rationally, he described the Kingdom of God by saying „the Kingdom is like this, “the Kingdom is like that.” His parables and paradoxical sayings invite deep spiritual and intellectual contemplation and interaction.

Rebecca West describes the dominant mood of our time as ‘a desperate search for a pattern.’ Postmoderns find patterns in stories. They use stories to cope with uncertainty and overload by finding meaningful patterns in chaos and complexity. The leaders of the emerging culture are the story-creators and the storytellers, the pattern-seers and the meaning-makers.

These meaning-makers are often novelists and fiction writers. Some postmoderns turn to novels and other forms of fiction to find stories similar to the ones they are living. They sometimes use the characters and story lines as maps for their own lives. They read to locate themselves on the spiritual terrain of their lives and to find ways across the desert plains of their life.

The truth about lying

Fiction author Tim O’Brien once confronted his struggle to tell the truth about his experiences as a foot soldier in Vietnam in his short piece, “How To Tell a True War Story.” He said that true war stories are beyond telling. There,s no adequate way to describe the stumbling confusion of combat, the beauty of tracer bullets zinging through the jungle, or the closeness of soldiers who have faced death together. He says the only way to tell the truth is to tell a lie.

O’Brien tells the story of two guys in his platoon named Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley, the best of friends. One day on patrol, Curt steps on a land mine and is blasted into a tree. He,s killed instantly. But it was as if Curt wasn't blown into the tree, O’Brien writes, but rather lifted by light and pulled into the tree. The platoon spent several hours cutting Curt,s body out of the trunk and branches.

The next day, the platoon stopped for rest in a little village. Tied to a wooden post was a baby water buffalo. Rat Kiley, who hadn't said a word since his best friend died, walks over to the water buffalo and calmly lifts his rifle and shoots off one of its ears. He then shoots the other ear off. He tears the buffalo to pieces with each succeeding shot. But the creature only suffers ^ none of the wounds are fatal. Finally, the other soldiers in the platoon put it out of its misery and dump its body down the village well. Rat Kiley wanders off in silence.

O’Brien says that whenever he tells this story, there is always a kindly person in the audience, often a little old lady, who comes up and says how tragic the

story is and how sorry she feels for the baby water buffalo. She says it's the worst war story she's ever heard. O'Brien responds that it's not a war story at all but a love story. It is the story of how Rat Kiley loved his friend Curt Lemon so much that he could not handle the loss. The love was that great.

O'Brien goes on to say that there never was a land mine or a baby water buffalo. He says that what really happened was that Rat Kiley just cried and cried and was inconsolable for days after Curt's death. But writing only the facts ^ that Rat just sat down and cried ^ doesn't tell the truth about what Rat was going through. So, O'Brien writes, he had to make up a story in order to tell the truth ^ the truth of the experience, the emotion, the meaning.

Jesus made up stories to express something about the spiritual truth of the Kingdom of God. The parables and sayings of Jesus about the Kingdom of God are attempts to talk about something that's almost beyond telling. The parables may not be factually true. But that's all right. Just because something isn't, literally true doesn't mean it isn't spiritually true. The parables are spiritual truth.

Reading with your heart

Mysticism, art and stories are the stuff of unwritten languages. You read them with your heart and not your head. You listen to them with your soul not your ears.

Do you speak in the tongues of an unwritten language?

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Resources:

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Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World, Walter Truett Anderson, Harper: San Francisco, 1990. A truth beyond telling

Reference: http://www.faithworks.com/archives/truth_beyond.htm