

The Ultimate Author:  
How God Reveals Himself through Storytelling  
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Author Note

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### Abstract

God is the Ultimate Storyteller. Storytelling provides a fantastic way to convey ideas and lessons in an easily understandable way, so it is not surprising that Jesus used parables to make God's teachings clear to anyone. We are specifically wired to connect to stories, because God Himself is a storyteller. It is one of many ways that we are connected to Him—we are made in His image. History is essentially a story and God is the Author. The patterns that knit our individual lives—our stories—together have all been written and sewn together by The Ultimate Author. He has a master plot for the world, of which every character—every person—is a crucial component. Through examination of Jesus's use of parables, the psychology behind storytelling, and the stories of the Bible, God reveals Himself through storytelling.

### The Ultimate Author: How God Reveals Himself through Storytelling

“‘The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.’ —Muriel Rukeyser” (Oberoi, 2014, para. 8). Storytelling is woven into our DNA. As human beings, we are pre programmed to identify with stories in many different forms. It begins in children, begging to be told a bedtime story at night, and ends in a home somewhere, being read to by a nurse or a volunteer because the eyes begin to fail. Stories connect people to people. Life-stories elicit empathy and understanding of our fellow humans. Storytelling is more than intrinsic to us; our whole life, no matter the length, is a story on it’s own, and we are the main character of our own story. Yet what must be understood about stories is that to every story there is a Storyteller. If we believe that there is a purpose to our lives—and every fiber within is sewn to reject that notion—then we are inherently admitting there is an Author who has decided our purpose from before the start. There is an ultimate Storyteller, and all evidence points to God—from the stories of the Bible to the inner workings of our minds, to all of history spread across the past, and streaming from the main question that has remained and grown since the time of Adam and Eve: Will mankind ever reconnect with God? Or will the world’s antagonist prevent it?

“Through stories we explain how things are, why they are, and our role and purpose. Stories are the building blocks of knowledge, the foundation of memory and learning. Stories connect us with our humanness and link past, present, and future by teaching us to anticipate the possible consequences of our actions” (National Storytelling Association, 1997, para. 2). We would be unable to understand anything at all if not for stories. In education, particularly difficult concepts are presented in a likened example, usually a story. “Even more than other social species, we depend on information about others’ capacities, dispositions, intentions, actions, and

reactions. Such ‘strategic information’ catches our attention as forcefully that fiction can hold our interest, unlike almost anything else, for hours at a stretch” (Boyd, 2009, p. 130). Stories are used in the workplace and in politics to convince others to understand what the teller understands, to convince, to inform, and most obviously, to entertain. Cultures collide and live on through the art of storytelling. “One reason we study history is to learn the stories of how our countries began and the difficulties we went through. Without these stories, we wouldn’t have such a clear picture of who we are. This is true for all countries. To understand people of a different culture, people with a different history, we need to learn their stories, what it means to them to be a part of their own history” (Breakthrough Learning, 2013, para. 2). Storytelling is so intrinsic, we often participate in it without identifying it—we subconsciously slip into daydreams when reality cannot hold our attention, and every night when we close our eyes some usually outrageous storyline that we rarely recall dances through our head. There is no denying that storytelling encompasses the entire life of man. It is part of what makes man human. From the time of bards to the invention of the printing press to the world of moving pictures, storytelling has come a long way, but it itself was not invented. It simply was and is. “Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years, sharing them orally even before the invention of writing. In one way or another, much of people’s lives are spent telling stories” (Delistraty, 2014, para. 7).

What makes up a story? A story invariably has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. If it is missing any one of those parts, it feels fragmented. Likewise, a story “includes a sense of completeness” (National Storytelling Association, 1997, para. 3), and there absolutely must be a problem: something that the main character desires, and an obstacle in getting it. If the protagonist desires nothing, there is no story. If there are no obstacles, there is no story. Kurt

Vonnegut is noted as saying, “Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water” (Goodreads, 2008, para. 1). The desire and the obstacle will most likely alter itself as the story progresses, but it should always be present until it is alleviated by the resolution. The action is usually driven by the protagonist attempting to defeat an obstacle, and failing; attempting to defeat a larger obstacle, and succeeding, but creating more obstacles to win and lose against, building up until the climax, or in simpler terms, the turning point of the story. The climax can often be shocking to the audience—it is the point of no return, the point where something integral changes forever. Without a climax, the story simply builds and builds until it deflates like a balloon, and hardly anything has really happened, making people wonder what the point of the story was. And every story must have a point—a purpose. A lesson, or a ‘moral’ usually. Otherwise, why would anyone care to listen?

Take the parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15 for example. In the beginning of the story, a man has two sons. One of them asks for his inheritance early—this is the driving point of the story, because the protagonist desires something here. Then the father divides the property between the two sons and gives the one son his share early. He takes it and wastes it quickly on many forms of immorality, so there is a new obstacle: how will he survive now that he is out of money? The lost son tries to fix it by hiring himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sends him to tend to the pigs. This fails to solve the problem, because he still has no food. It then occurs to him that his father’s servants have enough to eat, so he plans to go back to his father and confess his sins and beg to be taken in as a servant. So the lost son returns home, but while he was still a long way off his father saw him and ran to him and embraced him. This is the climax, the turning point of the story. Instead of rebuking and punishing his son,

he dresses him in the finest robes and slaughters the fattest calf for him to celebrate. The older son hears of this and becomes angry, but the father only says that the celebration is in order because his brother was dead, and now he is alive. This is the resolution, the clear ending to the story, and therein the main moral lies: “The older brother is put in place to show us the shameful self-righteousness of those whose own honor seeks the dishonor of others” (Wilson, 2014, p.70)

Jesus is famous for far more than his parables, of course, but his usage of storytelling in his teaching tells us something interesting about ourselves. Why did Jesus use stories to connect with mankind? Why did he use parables in his teachings rather than just telling people what to do and what not to do? “So God created mankind in his own image” (Genesis 1:27, New International Version). We are personally built by God to understand through storytelling, and this is clear because God himself is a storyteller. Jesus taught using stories because it is how we are made to understand. “If I were to say, ‘There’s an animal near that tree, so don’t go over there,’ it would not be as effective as if I were to tell you, ‘My cousin was eaten by a malicious, scary creature that lurks around that tree, so don’t go over there.’ A narrative works off of both data and emotions, which is significantly more effective in engaging a listener than data alone” (Delistraty, 2014, para. 13). God gave us the Bible filled with stories, because that is how we were created in order to connect with Him. He did not just create a book full of “love your neighbor, praise God, be humble” printed over and over again. He showed us what loving others, praising God, and being humble look like in a way that leaves a mark on our brains. That is what a mere story is capable of.

“Gazzaniga suspects that narrative coherence helps us to navigate the world – to know where we're coming from and where we're headed. It tells us where to place our trust and why.

One reason we may love fiction, he says, is that it enables us to find our bearings in possible future realities, or to make better sense of our own past experiences. What stories give us, in the end, is *reassurance*. And as childish as it may seem, that sense of security – that coherent sense of self – is essential to our survival” (Gots, 2012, para. 5).

Psychologically, storytelling has more power than we realize. “Psychology researcher Dan Johnson recently published a study in *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* that found reading fiction significantly increased empathy towards others, especially people the readers initially perceived as ‘outsiders’” (Delistraty, 2014, para. 9). “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). We were hardwired for storytelling because we were made in God’s image, not only to increase our understanding, but to give us the ability to do as Jesus commands: to love one another. Our affinity for storytelling becomes more dynamic, because it connects us to God in a new likeness: the ability to love.

A study done by Uri Hassen discovered that when listening to a speaker tell a story, the same areas of both the speaker and the listener’s brains would light up in an fMRI (Oberoi, 2014). “In a similar study, researchers in Spain found that written language that targets the senses or motor functions will fire off neurons in the corresponding sensory & motor cortexes in the brain. This is why just reading...’With his long nails, the boy proceeded to scrape down a blackboard.’ makes most people cringe” (Oberoi, 2014, para. 18 ).

“Inevitably, one must also ask if there is a network of genes responsible for the capacity to tell stories. What are the key neuroanatomical structures, the cells, the molecules” (Nigam, 2012, p. 569)? There has not been very much progress in identifying when mechanisms in the

brain are triggered by stories and somehow manage to affect our perception and understanding of the world on such a lasting scale. The effect of story goes even deeper than developing understanding or even empathy. “Neuroscience of brains on fiction gives us a clue. If you slide a person into an fMRI machine that watches the brain while the brain watches a story, you’ll find something interesting—the brain doesn’t look like a spectator, it looks more like a participant in the action” (Gottschall, 2013, para. 8). This is where the newfound source of empathy can be found. Narrative can convince our brains into acting as though we are part of the action within a story. The more access we have to storytelling, the more we gain the ability to empathize with it, as was shown within those who read more often (Delistraty, 2014).

Likewise, integral to story is its purpose. On a broader scale, “story” in this case can refer to the story of our lives. We all intrinsically desire for our lives to have some purpose, whether we believed that we create it ourselves or that God has placed it before us. Imagine for a moment that nothing matters. “The real difficulty in accepting Darwin’s theory has always been that it seems to diminish our significance... Evolution asked us to accept the proposition that, like all other organisms, we too are the products of random process that as far as science can show, we are not created for any... purpose or as part of any universal design” (Bergman, 2007, para. 11). This is seen over and over again in children, who naturally see the world in terms of design and purpose (Bergman, 2007). “One [teacher] testified that teaching evolution ‘impacted their consciences’ because it moved teachers away from the ‘idea that they were born for a purpose... something completely counter to their mindset and beliefs’” (Bergman, 2007, para. 4). Picture a world where your existence is a random accident and you will just die and fade away like you never existed. Do you feel the hopelessness at that image swelling up inside your chest?



Something within us is preventing us from being comfortable with the idea of a purposeless existence—even plenty of atheists acknowledge the inherent human need to contribute to society in some way—and it cannot merely stem from some Darwinian endeavor to survive, because if we die anyway and fade away, where is the evolutionary backbone? It does not exist because our morality is what prevents us from accepting purposelessness—and where does morality originate? Every person was designed with a prior purpose in mind for their lives, whether they attempt to run from it or cannot seem to find it. By simply existing man is fulfilling an aspect of God's plan, right up until the day he dies. Even every death in itself sets off another string of events that all compound impact into another level of the story God has spun for the world. Not a single leaf falls from a tree that was not intended by the ultimate Storyteller.

From the very beginning, God had a plan, a story plot unlike any other, and it began with the opening obstacle in this magnificently plotted tale of mankind. “The meta-story, the story of the stories that God is telling through the Bible is this: ‘Will man connect with God? Or will man’s antagonist prevent it’” (Barnes, 2014, para. 20)? The problem has carried on through the entirety of the Old Testament, throughout which a long list of characters both seek and resist connection with each other and their Creator, their stories weaving together through the centuries and even paralleling which each other across time (Barnes, 2014). For example, “Moses kills and spends years in the desert. David kills and spends years hunted by Saul. Paul kills and spends years in Arabia” (Barnes, 2014, para. 11). The problem remains the same as time passes. Character after character appears, faces a problem stemming from the growing disconnection from God. “Will Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph find connection or will they repeat the pattern of rebellion” (Barnes, 2014, para. 9)? From Cain and Abel, to Abraham, to all the characters of the

Old Testament, everyone is somehow attempting to reconnect with the Creator and falling into rebellion—the rejection of God—over and over again. The story goes on, and just when you believe that there is no hope left for humanity to ever reconnect with the Creator, Jesus is born as the missing link, the solution to the question asked over and over again, and you think that that’s it—that has to be the climax of this story, and the resolution is on its way!

“The Incarnation is God’s definitive answer to the emotional problem of evil... The God who is born is also the God who bleeds, the God who dies, the God who identifies with our sorrows by becoming the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (Rigney, 2012, para. 14). Yet, here we are, caught up in the same problem. Man continuously trying to reconnect with God, and even though man now has a direct link through Jesus’s sacrifice, reconnection is somehow more difficult than ever before. So the story continues, unfolding in subplot after subplot, repeating and intertwining—the big picture slowly attempts to take a form far beyond our own imaginations. “When we understand God’s heart for story and grasp the idea that he made us as protagonists in our own story, we can embrace problems that pose questions that grab ahold of our imaginations. Your story has a cast of dozens, each living their own story” (Barnes, 2014, para. 23).

Even before sending Jesus, God was more than the Author. “God reveals... his identity to Moses in a burning bush... God-as-Author and God-as-Character means that we can view God’s relationship to the world in two complementary ways... If history is a great river, he views the entire sweep of it and all the twists and turns in one all-sufficing glance from his heavenly mountain... as a character... this is how God who, though unchanging, becomes flesh and dwells among us” (Rigney, 2012, para. 10). He is both the Author and a Character. He is both the

Question and the Answer. In Exodus 3, God reveals the name “Yahweh” to Moses, and it can be translated as “The Causer of All Things.”

“God said to Moses, ‘I Am who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). “He is not defined by anything outside of himself. He is self-sufficient, independent, and autonomous. And then, in relation to the world that he speaks into existence from nothing, he is Yahweh, the Causer of All Things” (Rigney, 2012, para. 6). He stands completely outside and is entirely independent of His creation, yet He causes it all to exist, and the creation is comprised of a sequence of events containing a beginning, a middle, and an end (Rigney, 2012). What then, would you call Him? “You call him ‘The Author’” (Rigney, 2012, para. 7). “‘I AM’ emphasizes God-as-God; Yahweh emphasizes God-as-Author” (Rigney, 2012, para. 8).

Everything is a story, no matter how big or small, because that is what comprises humans—what we are wired for. All of the world is made of story after story, all wrapping around each other and coming together to form one mega story that is the tale of mankind. This is the largest, most massive story in all the history of the world, with the endless cast of characters, all infinitely important in one way or another, and all entirely fleshed out (literally). The world is composed of billions of interconnected stories, all going back to the first story which began as all stories do: with a character and a problem (Barnes, 2014). Everyone is the protagonist in their own stories, and the fact that God can keep up with each and every character that He created, past and present, meanwhile tying each subplot tightly together so that we hardly even scratch the surface of noticing... that is what makes God the Ultimate Author. Storytelling

brings us closer to Him in every aspect of our being, because the world we live in is made of stories, and we are each one of them.

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