

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# The importance of details and narrative in communicating truth



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Why does fiction open us up to a reality that we might not discover through other ways of communication? That was the topic of last week's Insight, and it bears further discussion. How is it that fiction can be the carrier of profound meaning and truth?

I believe that part of the reason is that fiction is built around telling a story, and stories live through details. Last week, I quoted a passage from Chaim Potok's "The Chosen" that dealt with meaning in life; and yet in the novel prior to this passage, the author describes the setting leading up to Reuven's discussion with his father. Potok writes, "I came back to my room and found my father standing in the doorway that led to his study. He had a bad cold and was wearing a woolen sweater and a scarf around his throat. This was his third cold in five months."

What does standing in the doorway, wearing a woolen sweater or having a scarf about one's neck, have to do with the meaning of life? Is it important to tell us how many colds he had in exactly five months? It is these details that carry the story forward. A book of just "big statements" about the meaning of life, ultimate reality, the importance of justice and love, wouldn't engage the reader or be inspiring. It is the details in the novel that bring the story to life and enable one to live inside this world and thus pay attention to its message.

Could it be that these so called "big questions," the really important truths, are so big that they need a "container" to hold them? Perhaps our finite minds cannot hold the fullness of reality without a mediating vehicle to hold them and enable us to transmit them. The genius of good fiction is that it gives us enough detail to enable us to comprehend bits and pieces of ultimate reality that relate to our everyday experience.

This relationship between big ideas and the details of story is also prominent in religious writings, even in our scriptures. Jewish scripture includes psalms or hymns, proverbs, and prophetic statements. But much of it is the telling of stories. It is the story of creation, of the flood, of the calling of Abraham to venture into a new land. We learn about the sibling rivalry of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and then Joseph and his brothers. Whether they are literal histories can be debated, but good histories are not lists of chronological events or mere facts; they are presented in story form. They allow the reader to enter into that world and identify with the characters. The story of the exodus has such power that the center of the major holiday of Passover is the reciting of the story with the details regarding each item of food and drink in the Seder.

Those details are picked up by the Christian narratives in the telling of Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper and the drama of the events of Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter. The details are important in remembering and telling of the message of God's love. One could just talk in the abstract about love, truth and justice, but it is carried best in the container of narrative. Jesus also used narrative when he told parables. He didn't just talk abstractly about caring and love, he talked about a woman who had lost a coin, a shepherd who had a missing sheep and a son who demanded his inheritance (basically wanting his father dead) and left home where "he squandered his property in loose living." (Luke 15) Jesus taught what it meant to love your neighbor by telling the story of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who was robbed and left for dead. It was not a religious leader who stopped to help him, but a



**"The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song" premiered last month on PBS. Submitted by McGee Media**

member of a despised minority, a Samaritan, who was "neighbor to him." (Luke 10:29-37)

It is the details of the story that make the teaching come to life. Narrative stimulates the imagination and becomes the container for the values that all religions teach. Religious narrative communicates eternal principles and values with specific persons, places and times. It is sometimes called the "scandal of particularity." Why would God pick someone like Moses fleeing Egypt from a murder charge, admitting that he was "slow to speech" and needing his brother's help, to lead His people from slavery to freedom? That narrative is so powerful that it became the theme and inspiration some 3,000 years later for the civil rights movement in America.

Narrative has power to contain the big ideas that can motivate individuals as well as movements for justice. Discussing values in the abstract is difficult, if not impossible, to communicate to the next generation. Beliefs and truths in the abstract often just lead to debate. We need to read the narratives in our religious heritage as well as hear each other's stories in order to find understanding and acceptance.

The recent PBS four-hour series on "The Black Church" is written and narrated by Henry Louis Gates Jr., a historian, literary critic, filmmaker and professor at Harvard University, where he serves as director of the Center for African and African American Research. The series explores the roots of African American religion, its role supporting the move from slavery to emancipation, and role in dealing with the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement. The stories and interviews provide the particularity of those experiences that no academic study of racism or structural racism could ever achieve. It brings narrative and details to this "big issue" of today. It is no accident that the full title of the series is, "The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song."

Histories and novels need detail and particularity to communicate powerful ideas and values. Let us keep telling our stories and learn from the stories of others. It might just lead us to sing our song together.

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