

## My Bumpy Road to Orality

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The careful exegetical preaching of professors at Dallas Theological Seminary drew me to that institution in 1975. During the next four years I was trained to be a critical thinker who could analyze the minutiae of a text in both Hebrew and Greek. My exposition of a biblical text was logical, purposeful, abstract and weighted heavily in the doctrinal sections of the Epistles. As an assistant pastor I honed my cognitive skills at a Bible church that valued detailed exposition. My initial "pipe dream" was to return to DTS to train others as I had been trained. However, after meeting a missionary to Thailand, that dream was changed to a strong desire to teach at the Bangkok Bible College. After arriving in Bangkok and taking a year of language study, the time came for my interview with the area director to determine my anticipated designation to BBC:

Larry - "David, I'm ready to begin teaching at the Bible school. When do I start?"

David - (laughing) "We have no policy to send new workers to the Bible school."

Larry - "Then where will I be working?"

David - "If you really want to train nationals, you must first understand what ministry in rural Thailand is all about. We are going to send you to Lamnaria, Central Thailand."

The core group of believers in Lamnarai was leprosy patients who were at best semi-literate. They were not at all impressed with my degrees, nor were they overly enthusiastic when I preached my expository sermons taken from outlines I had used in the States. They did, however, respond to stories. When a picture preaching poster was pulled out or the JESUS Film was shone, I noticed a visible change in their demeanor. They would inch closer to the

speaker or screen and seemed to hang on every word. The most intense interest was reserved for the periodic visits we received from a Christian *likae* troupe.

*Likae* is a Thai dramatic and musical theatre production that is performed on a stage in an open square or temple site. The first *likae* I observed was performed by lay members of a rural church before four hundred captivated Thai. The actors, bedecked in colorful costumes, told the story of the Bible from Genesis to the resurrection using traditional musical instruments, chants, songs, and dialogue. The climax came when a sequin encrusted Jesus (played by the best actor - a woman) was raised dramatically from the ground on a rough wooden cross. That dramatic moment proved to be a kind of cultural and missiological epiphany of sorts. For the first time I saw how powerful a culturally relevant narrative presentation can be. A story told with passion and drama does not need lengthy explanations of its meaning or application to life. I was surprised to find that theology and life applications are actually "imbedded" within stories.

After six years I was released to my "dream job" at the Bangkok Bible College. As academic dean, I quickly learned how our status as an accredited school forced us to provide courses that matched the accepted Western curriculum. Our lecturers taught as they had been taught and as a result promoted a Western teaching style that proved inadequate in the Thai context where the learning style is very different. Years later, when it was apparent that Thai churches were not receiving our graduates as we had expected, we did surveys to determine the cause. One underlying reason was that we were not matching our teaching style with Thai learning styles. Although officially a highly literate culture, Thailand at its core was an oral culture, which preferred narrative, drama, proverbs and music to propositional and analytical thought patterns common in the West.

This educational mismatch was most pronounced when we took young tribal converts, who grew up in a rural, illiterate area and transplanted them to our mega city where we taught them systematic theology in a classroom setting. After convincing them over three or four years of the "right" way to study and proclaim the Bible, we sent them back to their home village. Although they had our "coveted degree" they lacked the seniority, experience, and communication style that was acceptable in their villages.

After twelve years of church planting and teaching, I longed for a sabbatical in order to sort out my misgivings concerning Thai biblical education. I began my PhD at Biola University with a new class on Narrative taught by Dr. Tom Steffen. This course came into being because of Dr. Steffen's personal frustration while reaching the Ifugao tribe of the Philippines. Dr. Steffen (2005) said, "The Ifugao wanted stories and I gave them systematic theology, they wanted relationships and I gave them reasons, they wanted characters and I gave them categories."<sup>1</sup> I learned that " ... 70% of all people in the world are oral communicators; those who can't, don't, or won't learn through literate means."<sup>2</sup> A few classes with Dr. Steffen convinced me of the validity of oral approaches to communication and made me wonder how such approaches could be used in Thailand.

After finishing my doctoral class work in America, I returned to Thailand to do qualitative research on my dissertation. Over a period of seven years of field-testing, numerous interviews and group evaluations in all parts of Thailand, I was convinced that

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<sup>1</sup> Steffen, Tom

2005 'My Reluctant Journey into Orality.' Address to the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference on Reaching Oral Communicators. Anaheim, California July 13, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Making Disciples of Oral Learners. Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 54, Pattaya, Thailand 2004, p. 1

Thai people were indeed oral learners. A seasoned missionary summed it up this way, “Larry, Thai people do not learn from books. They learn from people.” Some countries like Japan are known for their voracious reading habits. The Thai, however, read very little for leisure but instead use literacy for mandatory tasks, business dealings, or education. Added to this is an increasing emphasis on secondary orality where media, computers and Internet use begins to overshadow printed information. Thai leisure time is often tied to television (Thailand has one of the highest viewing rates in the world). Such dramas and movies are extremely popular in Thailand because they tap into the innate love that the Thai have for story.

My doctoral studies laid a good foundation in the philosophy and dynamics of orality, but my stress was more on the meta-narrative as seen in Walk Thru the Bible or Chronological method. I had yet to see a method or approach to story telling that effectively treated the individual stories of the Bible in a truly oral way. The answer came through the invitation of some Thai friends to attend a workshop in Hemet California.

Hemet is the home of The God’s Story Project. The God’s Story: From Creation to Eternity is an 80-minute video presentation that gives the big picture of God’s redemptive plan for mankind. The universal appeal of this video has been shown by the fact that it has already been translated into almost 300 languages. After watching the success of this meta-narrative, the Director of God’s Story Project, Dorothy Miller, attended her first International Orality Network (ION) conference and saw afresh the centrality of story for delivering Bible truth in an oral fashion. The result was the development of an oral approach to inductive Bible study called *Simply the Story (STS)*.

I’ve attended workshops all my academic and missionary life, but this one was truly different and even shocking. The first shock was

entering an “oral zone” in which notebooks and pencils were forbidden. Another shock was learning the true condition of literacy in my own country.<sup>3</sup> I learned that 14% of Americans were woefully lacking in basic reading skills and were considered illiterate. Functionally-illiterate Americans with only basic skills made up 29%. Of intermediate ability were 44% of Americans who were considered semi-literate, which left 13% in the proficient or literate category. I began to think, “If the reality in America is this low, then just imagine where the Thai fall on the literacy scale.”

Another shocking reminder was just how prevalent narrative is in the Bible. Some scholars put the percentage of narrative genre in the Bible at 75%, which leaves 15% for poetical sections and the remaining 10% as doctrinal or teaching sections. Within that 75% are around 1000 stories, showing that God purposely chose narrative as the medium to present His redemptive message. After that presentation it didn't take my PhD to realize the importance of having the tool of a storyteller in my communications tool belt.

The training in *STS* was very convicting, since basically the only tool I had used since seminary was a big hammer labeled, “Exposition.” I used this hammer on most every passage I treated. My background in exposition pushed me towards an analytical, systematic, and sequential outlining of the Bible no matter what the genre dictated. My preferred genre, of course, was the Epistles or other doctrinal sections. I also inherited an oratory style popular from Greco-Roman times, which stressed a lecture mode. As a result, my default mentality when teaching students was that of pedagogy (literally the art and science of teaching children) in contrast to andragogy (the teaching of adults). In Thai culture the picture of pedagogy was seen most clearly by the “enlightened”

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<sup>3</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf\\_demographics.asp#1](http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp#1)

monk as he dropped pearls of wisdom into the open mouths of his novices. As an “Ajarn” (professor) in Thai culture, the Thai viewed me as being Biblically “enlightened” and I was more than willing to comply with their expectations.

The next five days of *STS* training hugely challenged my preconceptions about how best to communicate to my target people group. I saw small groups take a 10-verse story and learn it in only ten minutes without taking notes or relying on the printed text as a crutch. The best part of the training was finding lessons and principles within the story (spiritual observations) and then learning to apply those lessons to daily life and ministry. We learned to tell the story in an accurate and interesting way and then apply review techniques to make sure all that heard the story could hold it accurately in their heart and mind. Next the “digging” started as the storyteller used questions to help us discover truth for ourselves. The facilitator of the group was forbidden to preach, summarize or otherwise draw upon outside sources/cross references. Instead, they were instructed on how to use insightful questions to draw out the lessons embedded in the story. Keeping strictly to the story at hand insured a “level playing field” for all the participants. Sticking just to the story was a stipulation I found virtually impossible to follow.

At the end of the training, each participant was instructed to present a story for evaluation so that a certificate could be given indicating the first level of competency had been passed. The director, Dorothy, singled me out for special scrutiny. I felt good about my presentation. I had flown through many academic workshops in my day and thought this one would be no different. At the end, a Thai participant asked Dorothy if I had passed. Dorothy responded, “I’m afraid Dr. Dinkins didn’t pass. He violated too many of the basic principles of telling the story.” At that point I actually became angry. A number of lay people, including the Thai, had received their certificates. Yet Dorothy had

the audacity to flunk the “Right Reverend Doctor” Larry M. Dinkins! I returned home that day and informed my wife of this injustice. She replied, “That is the first academic assignment you have failed to pass since I have known you. Actually, it’s good that you flunked. You needed to be humbled.”

The truth hurt. Reverend Dinkins didn’t know how to follow seemingly simple directions for telling a Bible story. I also realized how tied I was to lecturing as my default communication tool. In the West we all use the lecture method because it delivers the largest amount of data in the least amount of time. It also allows the teacher or preacher to exercise control by maintaining the flow of information in one direction. What I discovered in telling stories was the power of acknowledging the experience and insight of your listeners by using questions to help them unpack the lessons and principles that God has embedded in every Bible story. The contrast between my standard MO (lecturing) and the interactive nature of telling stories was yet another shock I encountered at *STS*.

Usually I could rectify any perceived lack of competency in a given field of learning by simply doing more study or working through key books in that area. Many academic subjects can be mastered in this way, but not orality. Cognitively I understood the theories, but oral communication is one discipline that must be experienced and practiced. You find out quickly when all the notes, props and literate crutches are removed just how print and lecture oriented you are.

Failing *STS* set me on a quest to expose myself as much as possible to the whole field of orality and specifically to the art of telling Bible stories in an accurate but interesting manner. So far I have been through the *STS* training fourteen times. My Thai associate, John, has been even more. Both of us agree that we are just now learning to appreciate the mindset of oral learners.

Besides the weeklong trainings in *STS*, both John and myself have been leading weekly story training. John is a Thai pastor in Hollywood California and meets on Saturdays to practice *STS* with Thai church members. At the US Center for World Missions in Pasadena California, I help facilitate a group from numerous mission agencies who grapple weekly with this Bible story telling approach. All of this has been in preparation for field-testing that we have completed in Thailand on three occasions. The necessity of field-testing is seen by the fact that Christian workers used to an analytical Western style have difficulty accepting the validity of Bible story telling as an effective ministry tool. They often relegate story telling as applicable to children but feel that adults need more “meaty” presentations supported with workbooks and notes. Our challenge was to show how effective *STS* could be among Thai adults by teaching a large cross-section of Thai believers in various parts of the country.

After three short-term mission trips to Thailand and the presentation of *STS* in numerous Bible schools, churches, orphanages and even on radio, we are beginning to see just how impactful Bible study in an oral and interactive style is to Thai people. The following are just a few benefits we have seen:

1. Many workshops treat a broad number of topics broken into points and sub points which are difficult for the average student to explain and are especially hard to reproduce. With *STS* the topic of discussion is strictly the Bible story, which is being discussed. Oral learners are not privy to all the various helps and background knowledge that we have in the West. It is refreshing to remember multiple Bible stories and discuss their meaning and application to life over five full days. It is easy to go off on tangents when in a normal workshop, but this method by definition focuses the student’s attention on the story itself.

2. The actual study of the story does not start until each student is able to hold the story accurately in his heart and mind. When people have ownership over a story by truly absorbing it into their mind, heart and gut, they are able to discuss the lessons and principles of the story at a different level than is usually achieved by following someone's lecture notes.
3. As people absorb more and more stories they quickly realize that they have memorized more Scripture in one workshop than in possibly their whole life. Some review may be necessary, but certain stories get so engrained in your mind that they hardly need review. True oral learners can remember hundreds of stories, which push the number of remembered verses to over one thousand.
4. True oral learners will astound you by their ability to reproduce a story they have heard only once. Their minds are not so cluttered by the print and media saturated society we live in. Once I worked extremely hard to memorize the whole of Job chapter one. After I told this story, a Thai volunteer immediately retold this story without missing any of the details.
5. I have seen Thai housewives who have never given a talk on the Bible, suddenly become empowered in their story telling gift before a group of Thai church elders. Usually Thai pastors and elders control the "high ground" due to their gender, position and influence in the church. With an approach like *STS* you have a level playing field in which each student has equal access and opportunity to comment on the story alone.
6. One of the most thrilling aspects of telling stories is that people can immediately retell the story in a winsome and natural way with their family, at church, in the market, at work, on public transportation and even over the phone. The early church spread most rapidly in the first century mainly due to the fact that eyewitnesses were telling the story of Jesus over and over again. If we could recapture that

- mentality, I believe we would see a similar expansion of the Good News in our day.
7. Whenever possible, we encouraged students whose mother tongue was not the Central Thai language, to story in the language that was most natural for them. We started out reading the story in Central Thai, but it was thrilling to hear them retell the story in a Thai dialect or tribal language. The storyteller and listeners became more animated and involved when the mother tongue was used. In their normal church experience they were required to express themselves in Central Thai. Having the chance to use their own dialect proved to be one of the most liberating aspects of the training.
  8. Thai people are natural actors and love to dramatize Bible stories. However, they often go “overboard” and embellish the story through their acting. In this training, the story is retold while the actors simply pantomime the actions of the story. In this way, the integrity of the story is maintained and yet an opportunity to creatively express the emotions and dramatic aspects of the story is allowed.
  9. Bible College students confided in us that when our coming was announced, a collective sigh could be heard, “Not another five days of lecturing!” Some braced themselves for hours of note taking and a few brave souls confessed that in the past they often slept through workshops and were tempted to bring pillows to class. They were confused but pleasantly surprised when we told them to put away their notebooks. Next we placed them in small interactive groups. For the next five days they were grappling in an oral fashion with at least fifteen Bible stories, a process that was life changing for many of these prospective ministers.
  10. Many that we trained didn’t believe you could facilitate a small group for an entire hour with only a Bible in their hand and no notes. Thai are excellent note takers and for some it was a real shock to be told that they were entering an

oral zone in which pencils and notebooks were banned. When students realized that they could hold the story in their “heart pocket” and review and unpack it sequentially by seeing it as an unfolding picture in their mind’s eye, a kind of epiphany occurred. There was a certain freedom and sense of the Holy Spirit’s leading that is often missing in more controlled and programmed teaching venues.

11. Our team of trainers observed a real sense of *koinonia* and excitement as we worked together as a team to train the Thai. Usually during a presentation there is no chance to correct or comment on another trainer. The nature of *STS* allows for interruptions if a principle is violated or a helpful comment needs to be made. The students realize that we are all learning how to tell these stories (even the trainers). This helps create a safe environment in which people can be lovingly corrected for an inaccuracy without losing face or becoming embarrassed.

It was gratifying to see so many missiological applications for *STS* on the field, but by far the most impactful aspect of this tool has been the personal spiritual applications that I have made to my daily life and ministry. Familiar stories I learned at my grandmother’s knee are taking on new meaning and becoming incorporated into my daily quiet times. Like most believers, I struggled with Bible memory and became discouraged when I looked back on all the memory programs I had started and gave up on. Now I find my Bible memory skyrocketing as an increasing “Rolodex” of stories is stuffed into my heart pocket. Continual review of individual verses was mandatory in the past, but now I find that I am retaining large numbers of verses with virtually no need for review. My exposure to *STS* would be well worth it if the only benefit were in the area of Bible memory and meditation.

An accumulation of memorized stories is nice, but that is only one aspect. In the past I taught apologetics in seminary and stressed the

power of logic and finding holes in another person's argument. These days when people ask me what I do I reply, "I'm a professional story teller." This seldom fails to open up an interesting bridge to the gospel and has started some wonderful discussions. Jesus often told a story or parable and let it sit with the listener without further explanation. Sharing a Bible story ends up being a very winsome way to communicate truth. Once a seatmate in a plane learned I was a missionary and said, "Promise me you won't preach at me." After I simply told a Bible story, my seatmate was disarmed and we ended up talking for a long time about serious spiritual themes.

For the first time in my ministry I am seeing people consistently emote as they identify with Bible characters. In the past, if Thai people were crying during my sermons it was probably due to my bad Thai language. Now when I pause at the application stage of a story like Blind Bartimeus, I find that the Spirit often softens and prepares hearts for a personal discovery of truth, a truth that penetrates to a deep level in the human heart.

An experience from my Junior High days may help you understand why my journey into orality has been such a "bumpy ride". In the eighth grade I took biology, a typically boring class. I loved this class for only one reason – you got to cut up frogs with a sharp scalpel. I placed my frog on a paper blotter and began to make incisions to extract the various organs. Next I pinned the organs to the blotter and stepped back to admire my handy work. Frog parts were meticulously arranged on my desk in their proper place, but there was one problem; the frog could no longer jump.

Over the years I had used my exegetical scalpel to dissect hundreds of sections of holy writ, analyzing them in the original languages and then arranging them in sequential, logical fashion for teaching or preaching purposes. I had done this so often that I could diagram most any passage and construct a detailed outline with

points and sub points in a few minutes. This time tested method is a valid and proven approach which expositors have used for centuries. It was developed within highly literate cultures and continues to resonate with print oriented societies.

The Thai, however, were not so print oriented. By necessity, they had adapted to Western communication methods, but deep inside they were oral learners who want to see their “frog” jumping and moving rather than pinned to a blotter. The huge majority of the unreached in our world are preferred oral learners who respond best to Bible stories that are told accurately and then unpacked using questions. When wrapped in an oral package the Scriptures retain a vitality and ability to jump and move in the life of oral learners.