

Storytelling

The Twilight Between the One and the All

*La Memoria es la raíz de la sabiduría
(Memory is the root of wisdom).*

DORIS GARCÍA-RIVERA

Let me tell you a story.

In a time when there was no time, it was the time of the beginning. Neither night nor day. It was a twilight where Time was motionless, going nowhere and coming from nowhere. This was the time when the greatest gods lived, those who gave birth to the world, the first ones. These gods were seven, and each one was two. They were small and didn't know much. But they did talk and talk a lot! They were pure chatter, talking at the same time without understanding one another at all. But—who knows how or why—there came a moment when they all fell silent at the same time! Then one of them spoke and said that it was good that when one spoke, the others should not speak, so that the one who spoke could be heard and the others who were not speaking could hear him. The seven, who are two in one, agreed to speak in turns. And the oldest of our elders say that this was the first agreement in history: to not only speak but also to listen. The gods looked at the corners of that dawn without day or night, without world, persons, animals, or things. They realized that all the little bits of that *twilight* spoke truths and that one person alone could

not hear all the *whispers*. So, they divided the work of listening to the dawn and thus were able to learn everything that the world of that time, not yet a world, had to teach them. Then the world took shape. And so, the first gods saw that One is necessary. It is necessary for One to learn and to work and to live and to love. But they also saw that One is not enough. They saw that All are needed and only All are sufficient to set the world in motion. And so it was that the first gods, the greatest gods, those who were born in the world, *became wise* knowing how to speak and listen. Not because they knew many things or because they knew a lot about one thing—they were wise—but because *they understood that ‘the One and the All are necessary and sufficient.’* (Marcos 1998, author’s translation)

Like the annoying and senseless babbling of the seven gods, we perceive the world as noisy and chaotic. The shift in global leadership and geopolitical changes, the rollback of rights and rising authoritarianism, growing economic and health disparities, crises in education, rising misinformation, and massive population displacement, among others, have profoundly altered national and global priorities. The way we engage our world has changed as well as the way we teach, learn, and do ministry. Given these paradigmatic changes, Western societies have steadily moved away from collectivism, embeddedness, nature, justice, and history, toward an “egosystemic absoluteness” of technologically hyper-stimulated juvenile individualism searching for pleasure (Pietropaoli 2023, 5 and 15). These “piercing and chaotic” tendencies affect local religious life in the United States and Canada. They are shaped by lack of empathy, inability to cooperate, the sense of entitlement and superiority, and the feelings of disconnection and loneliness that many ministers and religious leaders recognize. These human scarcities fuel most of the sociopolitical division, fearing and hate of differences, and cultural wars we experience.

New generations of theology learners—older, bivocational, knowledgeable of the world and the church—who work in these challenging contexts question the value of traditional degrees, and seek shorter, more flexible and ministry-relevant options. Being more self-directed, drawing knowledge from their accumulated experience, focusing on problems rather than subjects, and feeling the need to understand the reasons for their learnings (Olivares-Cuhat 2022, 135), adult learners modified the professional model of theological education into a model that emphasizes “human” formation (Aleshire 2021, 74, 140). The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) recognizes this reality, where

soft and hard competencies must align better to the leadership needs of congregations and theological schools' curricula (Gin et al. 2025, 174) to answer to the challenging and diverse new contexts of ministry.

Students in the recent cohorts I teach are older and bivocational. As with many of my peers, I often see people being absent or late to class or with incomplete assignments due to their "other responsibilities." Recent ATS student data confirm these perceptions with 14.8% of degree-seeking students aged 56 or older aligning with late-career and retirement-age students (The 2024, 1). These companions face not only personal stress, political and cultural divisions and church membership decline but a work reality of attending multiple individuals who are in crisis while balancing their own families and facing frequent personal or job-related criticism and complaints. Beside these personal realities, churches and faith-based organizations push religious leaders to develop ministries attuned to the needs of their associated congregations, groups and communities.

The combination of competencies needed for these different spaces, like preaching or counseling might align well with the curricula of most theological schools. However, other competencies used across institutions in advocacy, poverty alleviation, public witness, and so on, require a diversity of competencies from courting institutional support, conflict transformation, interpersonal skills, project management or digital literacy to self-care and time management. These competencies are seldom taught in the typical curriculum of theological schools and align more with lifelong learning skills (Gin et al. 2025, 166, 171). Theological schools have responded to these new expectations by diversifying programs, targeting new student populations, developing flexible learning models, streamlining operations, revising their governance model, partnering with other organizations, or fine-tuning their lifelong learning spaces. In all these processes, storytelling is a strategic communication mode.

Storytelling is an art and a process where a teller uses a narrative structure and dramatic and mental imagery to weave events in an articulate and sequential manner to communicate with an audience. Stories are "twilights of knowledge" reverberating throughout human experience, the ecotones where knowledge is shared and acquired and transformation is achieved, both at the individual and the collective level. Storytelling and narrative are closely related and share multiple definitions: where narratives are frameworks for stories, storytelling is the process of conveying those stories. Narratives—like myths, legends, folktales, podcasts, case studies, gossip, or even autobiography—heroize

or vilify people, spaces or concepts to identify deep culturally seated values and explain complex rational or irrational issues—how the world functions or who we are. They present the boundaries of accepted behavior or how to resist these limitations. Storytelling is culturally universal and might be considered the original form of knowledge sharing and teaching. The oral communication of any and all stories or narratives configures storytelling (Rocha and Davel 2023, 2).

This chapter is about storytelling. Storytelling in learning-teaching ecosystems is an entry to the wealth of wisdom and knowledge adult learners already hold. Whispering to the impact of changing paradigms in Western societies and theological ecosystems—and to some knowledge theories and learning methods, I discuss the use of narrative pedagogy in learning-teaching spaces, ministry, and management. This chapter is also a story disguised as academic discourse.

Science of Storytelling and Knowledge

More than once my students have expressed their feelings while reading some of the course materials. Beside the usual questions for critical or narrative analysis, I always ask them—How does this reading make you feel? Their responses are broad: some are vague like “gut feeling” or “heavy hearted” while others are specific like “angered” or “confused.” I have also found that when my students interpret and associate these readings to their own lived experiences and contexts, their storytelling develops with a deeper impact for the whole group. In *With Bodies*, Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen show how narrative understanding is grounded in the “bodies” and “experiential background” of readers (2021, 35). Embodied responses to the act of reading show how our bodies engage the narrative channeling the experience through imagination and affective dynamics. For Caracciolo and Kukkonen, when a person reads a story, the body becomes a “site of conversion . . . between concrete structures of spatial experience and abstract structures of conceptual thought” (2021, 10). An understanding of adult learners as active agents—creators of knowledge, practices, and relationships stimulating analysis, self-direction, and autonomy in the learning process—is one of the gifts of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy (2005). When centered in the learner, storytelling becomes at once aesthetic objects assisting people to make sense of the world as well as an embodied battlefield—a central point of struggle

between dominant and subordinate social groups (Freire 2005, 22–23, 100). I have come to understand with the years that *we are stories, living embodied stories*. Our brains are “storytelling brains” that best learn, remember, and form significant emotional bonds through stories.

Theological Education, Ministry, and Storytelling

Where do these contextual whispers and embodied knowledge fit within the theological ecosystem? Even with the mismatches between the traditional pedagogical academic approach, with the unique needs of adult learners and their ministries, academics in the higher education theological ecosystem are increasingly understanding how adults learn and how successful thinking relies on information effectively burned in long-term memory, bodies, and experience.

As a minister who regularly preaches, I find that preaching is an essential skill required in congregations and in some religiously based non-profit organizations. Preaching was the second most reported competency by ATS alums, while communication skills, pastoral care, and counseling were at the top for Latiné alum (Gin et al., 158–59, 165). Ministers see themselves as supporters, advisors, and companions of their congregations and communities, using their communication skills in a diversity of contexts where preaching and counseling have become two of the most important. I found Voelz’s (2019) proposition of the preacher-as-teacher extremely useful and deeply relevant especially as he uses Freire’s concepts to inspire both the minister and the people to self-knowledge, critical thinking, and embodied action. Early in my ministry I learned the value of storytelling. Ministers share narratives that highlight personal and collective struggles and triumphs. We underscore in these narratives the importance of ethical values alongside collective agency, social connection, and mutual support but not always with the communicative framework to be effective in the use of storytelling for sustaining and generating hope.

As more religious institutions develop adult education, story-driven learning cuts through all learning theories as it is a ubiquitous, culturally-flexible, and socially-relevant method aligned with human cognitive and emotional processes. The principles of storytelling combine into the art of dialogue as a shared activity resulting in a transfer of information across our brains, nurturing

effective teaching and learning. A few instructional models and learning methods illustrate storytelling in academic settings.

The *microlearning* framework is ideal to deliver content in small modules. The method uses a short, concise format improving learning and assisting memory encoding (Fountain and Doyle, 2012). If planned with lifelong learning in mind, this method integrates individual factors such as gender, age, and cognitive ability to shape the design and content. Microlearning principles overlap with technology-assisted learning, such as mobile devices, and ubiquitous learning (anytime, anywhere) by using *digital storytelling*, a 2–3-minute-long multimedia tool typically combining audio, images, and video clips to design and originate engaging and interactive narratives. I use digital storytelling as part of a project-based learning course, and while some students struggle with multimedia formats, at the end of the course they also acquire these skills while affirming their organizational and sequential thinking.

Project-Based Learning is a model I have used for years. This model promotes learners to engage in hands-on projects to solve problems or address complex questions, usually engaging in reflective learning, research and team-oriented requiring exploration, critical thinking, and informational synthesis (Žerovnik and Šerbec 2021; Almulla 2020, 3, 12). I have found that Project-Based Learning helps students to integrate not only the learning outcomes into their ministries but their lifelong learning as well. In one of my courses, I ask the students to develop an educational project, usually a short video or presentation (3–5 min) for their congregations, showing how a contemporary popular cultural artifact significant to their ethnic context, history, language, and culture relates to a biblical text of the Torah. I have found that the stories students develop in this model take surprising paths depending on their accumulated knowledge and experience. This model is one of my favorites as it results in the students' effective engagement and skills development while providing a venue to support their congregations in a creative manner.

Personal storytelling is another method for students to share their own stories and experiences, fostering a sense of community and providing diverse interpretations and reflections about *hechos cotidianos* (everyday happenings) (Benavides 2020, 154, 156). I use personal storytelling to welcome the learners in asynchronous courses (“break the ice”) or to establish trust and increase communication. I usually share a very short story about a picture with

deep meaning for me. Beginning with my own life-long learnings, I invite my companions to engage the learning outcomes. I always have several students responding to the story, engaging the conversation, and sharing their own experiences or thoughts on the theme.

A second way I use personal storytelling is when I ask the learners to write a personal story highlighting the learnings they gained by reading about a biblical leader like Moses, Deborah, Jephthah, and others, in relation to their own leadership challenges. I am intentional in including leaders with controversial stories as mirrors to our own humanness. These types of narratives are sacred, treasured windows into the soul of learners (or a community, or people) as well as valuable entries to the wealth of knowledge adults already have, validating their lifelong learning journeys and contributing to our collective growth (Lucas 2023). Sometimes, unplanned personal storytelling happens when I highlight biblical stories while integrating pastoral cases or media news related to the learners' context. It is gratifying to observe the active participation, depth of thoughts, challenging questions, meaningful dialogues on pastoral possibilities, and the diverse cultural meanings learners bring to the discussions.

However, listen to three cautionary words. First, when integrating narratives intentionally geared to enhance dialogue, *counter-storytelling* sometimes comes into the forefront. The initial Zapatista's story describing the gods who were "one always two," where "one person alone" could not hear all the truths, neutralizes and disputes the narrative of individual achievement, the "me alone" myth of success and the "me all knowledgeable scholar" often found in the theological ecosystem. *Counter-storytelling* empowers and gives agency to marginalized communities and challenges dominant narratives that ignore and sustain systemic inequalities. "As individuals reclaim their voices and share their stories of resistance and resilience, they contribute to a collective re-storying that can shift social consciousness" and enrich our own lives (Mahmood 2025).

Second, in the academic setting it is extremely important to be aware of the learners' pressures and vulnerabilities. When using personal storytelling, facilitating debriefing sessions in a safe and welcoming environment is essential to protect the learners and the delicate balance that exists between sharing personal experiences, ethical boundaries, and confidentiality while fulfilling the learning objectives.

Third, the effectiveness of these learning methods and others (like *microlearning* or *flipped learning* for example) depends on the successful integration of institutional learning support across board governance, faculty, overall administrative setting and learning support (IT, policies, course design, curriculum management, digital or physical learning spaces, and so on), and learners' participation, motivation, context, and media engagement. In some settings the alignment of these factors might not always be possible, impacting the overall assessment of the method and the educational experience.

Storytelling and Administrators of Lifelong Learning

As organizations manage the exponential increase in the volume and variety of data, storytelling have been shown to effectively transfer different types of knowledges, bolstering collective identity, shifting organizational culture, and creating new ways to think about practice, and spaces for active learning and organizational memory (Jankowski and Baker 2019, 11). Academic and lifelong learning administrators can effectively transform data and visuals into compelling stories highlighting the adult learners' success stories (developing pride, satisfaction) and also their failures (developing empathy, intentionality in changing this reality) (Matthew 2025, 6–7). Telling personal stories about how a program has changed our own perspective of learning, diversity, or human essence—always tied up with the organizational mission—is a powerful tool to impact the decision-making of deans, board of trustees, denominational, or any other stakeholders on behalf of lifelong learning. Relevant elements of storytelling in management refer to 1) its communicational power defining the type of organization, positioning, values, mission and vision; 2) its power of engagement contributing contextualized narratives, 3) the administrators as potential mentors and inspirators, and 4) managers' storytelling and story writing skills might support situational multidimensional outlooks and guidelines for change (Rocha and Davel 2023, 3, 5). Like the gods in our story, administrators of academic and lifelong learning programs can harness the wisdom and power behind storytelling, inspiring people to let our skepticism go and make ourselves resonate in their agenda (Gottschall 2012).

Conclusion

The Zapatista's story opens enigmatic paths, each of them welcoming and frightening. Standing firm in a liberationist narrative pedagogy against colonizing and imperial ideologies, this Zapatista's story supports a decolonizing method to reflect critically on knowledge representation that privileges Western norms and cognitive styles. It provokes a review of relevant social processes—from stillness to motion, from meaningless individual chattering to cohesive oral expression and respectful effective listening, from self-centeredness to collectivism, from ignorance to shared wisdom to decolonizing formats of lifelong learning (Flores et al. 2025, 334–35).

Stories, like Jesus' parables, are twilight zones where we are invited to appreciate foundational aspects of ourselves, humanity, social or theological values, and an understanding of reality. As the theological ecosystem expands its lifelong learning opportunities, storytelling becomes an integral part of the learning process which is divine as well as human (UNESCO 2022). However, is it possible to move beyond the dichotomy of individualism/collectivism? We laugh at the idea of these unwise babbling gods, but at a much deeper level through its language dynamics, this story conveys one truth (and a subtle warning) about the balance required to move the world forward—out of paralysis and chaos—into interconnections, movement, new creations, and maybe hope.

Further research is needed to clarify the use of storytelling in a purposeful, integrated institutional vision building sustainability through the development of shared individual and collective knowledge of peoples. Our unique talents and experiences alongside the wisdom of the collective are necessary and sufficient to understand reality, to move the world forward and thus, to survive. Enabling the acquisition of wisdom from and towards each other might help us create a more inclusive learning environment and open new avenues for research and collaboration. Academic production lacks consistency on the use of stories in theological education and its associated management areas. Digital storytelling is here to stay, but how do we manage to make this experience not only a personal but also a lifelong learning one? Further research is also needed to validate the findings on the use of narratives and storytelling across these varied contexts.

Finally, how useful would it be to integrate administrative stories as case studies or the active participation of our own administrators

in our classrooms to provide a different perspective? These processes require partnerships, teamwork, and definitely administrative and academic willingness to test the boundaries of creative education and storytelling in our midst. Of course, we also require a persistent examination of the assumptions and values underpinning current learning methods (Lalujan and Pranjol 2024, 30–31). At the base of it all, however, “we tell stories to express our hardest, best, most authentic truths” (Dicks 2018, 25) and maybe to become wise while we continue to shape our world.

References

- Aleshire, Daniel O. 2021. *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*. Eerdmans.
- Almulla, Mohammed Abdullatif. 2020. "The Effectiveness of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) Approach as a Way to Engage Students in Learning." *Sage Open* 10 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020938702>.
- Benavides Bailón, Jeovanny M., and Paola Mendoza Lino. 2020. "El Storytelling en la Educación Superior: un Análisis del Impacto y Pertinencia de la Narración de Historias en el Proceso Formativo [Storytelling in Higher Education: An Analysis of the Impact and Relevance of Storytelling in the Educational Process]." *Revista Científica Hallazgos* 21 5 (2): 149–61. <https://doi.org/10.69890/hallazgos21.v5i2>.
- Caracciolo, Marco, and Karin Kukkonen. 2021. *With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition*. Ohio State University Press.
- Dicks, Matthew. 2018. *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change your Life Through the Power of Storytelling*. New World Library.
- Flores, Kenedy G., Aniza C. Gadaza, Don C. Galdonez, Joemar N. Pihnuton, Ronie B. Soriano, and Alexander G. Killip Jr. 2025. "Decolonizing Pedagogy: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Philippine Historical Narratives in Higher Education Curricula." *International Journal on Culture, History, and Religion* 7 (1): 333–56. <https://doi.org/10.63931/ijchr.v7i1.130>.
- Fountain, S. B., and K. E. Doyle. 2012. "Learning by Chunking." In *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, edited by N. M. Seel. Springer US.
- Freire, Paulo. 2005. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, expanded edition. Translated by Donald Macedo, Dale Koike, and Alexandre Oliveira. Westview.
- Gin, Deborah H.C., Jo Ann Deasy, and Grego Peña-Camprubí. 2025. "Reimagining the Role of Graduate Theological Education in

- Clergy Formation.” *Christian Higher Education* 24 (2): 148–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2025.2462802>.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. 2012. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Jankowski, Natasha, and Gianina Baker. 2019. *Building a Narrative via Evidence-Based Storytelling: A Toolkit for Practice*. University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. October. <https://web.archive.org/web/20241211000815/https://www.unco.edu/assessment/assessment/pdf/niloa-evidence-based-story-telling.pdf>.
- Lalujan, Joanne Daniella, and Md Zahidul Islam Pranjol. 2024. “Project-Based Learning as a Potential Decolonised Assessment Method in STEM Higher Education.” *Trends in Higher Education* 3 (1): 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu3010002>.
- Lucas, Julio. 2023. “Bridging Cultures: The Art of Storytelling in Hispanic Heritage Month Campaigns.” LinkedIn, October 4. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/bridging-cultures-art-storytelling-hispanic-heritage-month-lucas/>.
- Mahmood, Zara. 2025. “The Power of Narrative: How Stories Shape Social Consciousness and Identity.” *Rock & Art*, June 3. <https://www.rockandart.org/narrative-stories-social-identity/>.
- Marcos, Subcomandante Insurgente [Rafael S. Guillén Vicente]. 1998. “Historia del Uno y los Todos [Story of the One and the Many].” *Enlace Zapatista*, December. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/1998/12/11/historia-del-uno-y-los-todos/>.
- Matthew, Bamidele., Ahmed, M., Ahmed, B., Campbell, L., Jeet, V., Soliman, K., Nazneen, A., and Sayad, Samar. 2025. “The Art of Data Storytelling for Non-Technical Business Stakeholders: Bridging the Gap Between Insights and Decisions.” *International Journal of Data Analysis Techniques and Strategies*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393506045_The_Art_of_Data_Storytelling_for_Non-Technical_Business_Stakeholders_Bridging_the_Gap_Between_Insights_and_Decisions.
- Olivares-Cuhat, Gabriela. 2022. “Maximizing Learning of L2 Adult Learners in Higher Education.” In *Maximizing the Power of*

Proficiency. Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/facpub/5267/>.

Pietropaoli, Matteo. 2023. *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems: The Extinction Society*. Springer.

Rocha, Camilla Netto, and Eduardo Davel. 2023. "Stories in Management Education: Relevance, Knowledge and Perspectives." *Contextus: Revista Contemporânea de Economia e Gestão / Contemporary Journal of Economics and Management* 21: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.19094/contextus.2023.82316>.

The, Christopher. 2024. "Average Age of Students Rising: Emerging Opportunities for Theological Schools." *Colloquy Online*, November. <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/average-age-of-students-rising.pdf>.

UNESCO. 2022. "Transforming Higher Education Institutions into Lifelong Learning Institutions." UIL Policy Brief 14. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382491>.

Voelz, Richard. 2019. *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act*. The Artistry of Preaching. Abingdon.

Žerovnik, Alenka, and Irena Nančovska Šerbec. 2021. "Project-Based Learning in Higher Education." In *Technology Supported Active Learning*, edited by Carlos Vaz de Carvalho and Merja Bauters. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2082-9_3.

