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Serving the Story

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Serving the Story

Abstract

"The kinds of stories we tell about ourselves matter, and the story patterns that control and direct our lives are powerful forces."

Posting about using our life stories for service to the church from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/serving-the-story/>

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Serving the Story

 [inallthings.org/serving-the-story/](https://allthings.org/serving-the-story/)

Howard Schaap

I suppose I was like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, though instead of moving from St. Paul to East Egg, New York, I only moved from Edgerton, MN, to St. Paul, MN. No, I wasn't exactly in search of wealth and high-class living as Nick was; I was more in search of complexity, a minor difference. The point is that when I left for college in the Twin Cities, I saw myself on a quest from nowhere to somewhere, from less than to greater than.

There are more questers in my family. For my father before me, the Promised Land was California. In the mid-1980s, with a depressed local economy, a booming California looked all the more golden to my father, a place to redeem himself and start anew.

Two generations before that, my great-grandfather left the bleak economic situation in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. Leaving for rural Leota, Minnesota, meant going from farm laborer/fish monger to land owner, certainly a no-brainer with only an ocean and half-a-continent crossing in between.

Only my grandfather was what [Wendell Berry](#) calls a “sticker,” a lifelong resident of Leota and Edgerton, Minnesota, though he had a quest all his own: from a newly broken homestead to a nice house in town.

We can categorize these stories a number of ways, from Upward Mobility to the [Brain Drain](#) to the American Dream. In literary terms, the simplest way to chart this story is with a version of [Freytag's pyramid](#). We've come to expect story to have a conflict, increasing suspense or “rising action,” a climax, and a resolution. Film has dominated our sense of story in recent years, and the [three-act structure](#) of film has become a byword in Hollywood.

Even more importantly, perhaps, this structure of story has become deeply ingrained in us. It is often the way we expect story to be. Indeed, as I headed off to college, I basically conceived of my life in this story framework: life presented a series of conflicts, primarily involving finding and navigating a career in some upward — always upward — direction, with invigorating subplots in marriage and family until some future pinnacle where the three coalesced— and then I retired.

This type of story— let's call it the Upward Mobility plot — has its place, no doubt. My brother-in-law living in Europe, though critical of many aspects of American life and politics, remains envious of the comparative social mobility that he sees in the U.S. as compared to his own society. When one considers the overwhelming antagonist that fate is in many cultures, too, the desire to grow and change looks pretty attractive.

However, what worries me is the way this story tends to colonize other types of stories in our world. What else is there besides bettering one's lot in life, besides the Upward Mobility plot? In big ways and small, how do we orient our lives except by goals, progress, achievement? This is THE story of our lives, isn't it, one that's become so pervasive we have a hard time imagining another model? If we weren't trying to lose weight, to get that raise, to read through the entire Bible in one year, to better ourselves, what would the purpose of our lives be?

Consider what this plot means for young people. Students come to Dordt College overwhelmingly for one reason: to advance themselves in the story their parents want them to tell with their lives, a story of

achievement and bettering themselves, primarily measured by a successful and remunerative career.

In my own story, when I decided I wanted to return from the city to my own small town, I had a difficult time reimagining the story I was telling. For a time I perpetuated the Upward Mobility story by encouraging students to leave for a “better” place and social position in the world. I also had the option of repackaging my story via the “quality of life” spin. The small town is a great place to raise a family, this spin goes — you can’t beat the quality of life. True enough, though if by quality of life we mean a safe place to pursue an idyllic life measured by accumulation of stuff, then this spin is also really about Upward Mobility.

The Upward Mobility narrative, then, dovetails perfectly with a market society. In fact, the plot of the three-act story looks suspiciously like the chart of the Dow Jones Industrial average. The economy is supposed to have a continued rate of rising action — it’s supposed to grow and swell and build forever and ever. We hear about its movements almost as regularly as the weather. We can conceive of little else than its growth, and fear its decline — its resolution — as like unto death itself.

Take the iPhone 6 as a practical example of this. The iPhone has been steadily progressing, reaching new and better heights and swelling Apple’s value. You can chart this on a graph. Should Apple announce that it was satisfied with the iPhone 6 and that it was immediately ceasing all R&D on the product, we would be horrified. We could hardly imagine something more nonsensical and would pray for the return of Steve Jobs from the dead to drive Apple back to transcendence with his apparently perfectionistic tantrums. Adapt or die is the evolutionary — as well as the economic and individual — story of our time.

The fallout the Upward Mobility story creates, especially when it dominates other types of story, is also immense: the rise and fall of the market carries our hopes and dreams; the pressure upon young people to ratchet up achievement levels, as [Jason Lief](#) and others have written, can lead to breakdown; the increasing disdain we have for those who won’t join our escalator to the sky leads to labeling them, officially or unofficially, as the “undeserving poor.”

Of interest, too, is how we fit faith into the story of Upward Mobility. Especially for Americans with questing and progress in our blood, we can over-emphasize biblical stories that fit with our American story. Consider how the individualized call of Abraham to a Promised Land of blessing fits our religious preferences: a personal relationship with Jesus calls us to the Promised Land of Heaven, making us not quite at home in this world — despite the irony that as North Americans we live in the biggest, most elaborate houses the world has ever seen. Then again, why wouldn’t we, if growth and progress are the point of the story we’re telling?

At the church level, the Upward Mobility story explains mega churches. Personally, as I left for the city, I certainly was looking to “move on up” to a church that was, if not mega, at least more... complex.

But are there other ways to tell our story, other models? Certainly. Famously, [Joseph Campbell](#) charts the path of the hero as circle. In Western Christianity, we tend to distrust circular stories as “new age” or “circle of life” Disney philosophy. However, scripture includes plenty of circles: Christ is the new Adam; in baptism we are reborn; in communion we remember our Lord and anticipate the future feast with him; in Christ’s promise of new creation, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:5 KJV). On an individual level, consider the times in life where we return to a place or experience after much time has passed. Hopefully, the second time around we find ourselves with a new perspective, new knowledge that we didn’t have the first time around, perhaps even wisdom.

Comedy, too, can be viewed as a more circular story: an imbalance or impasse in life or society leads to a series of fortuitous near-misses, but by the end balance is restored, often symbolized in a wedding, and life or society is able to begin afresh. This pattern fits comedies from Shakespeare to *While You Were Sleeping*.

It also fits the story of the early church — not necessarily in the fall-down-with-laughter sense, mind you, though plenty of that story is ripe with irony— but in its pattern. Think of the impasse of circumcising Gentiles. Think of Cornelius—a centurion!—contacting Peter. Think of Peter’s vision and the sheer absurdity of it from Peter’s standpoint— a sheet full of unclean animals coming down from heaven. Think of how this impacted the Council of Jerusalem’s decision about the Gentiles. That’s comedy. Comedy is the story of community: stumbling through things and by grace reaching a new understanding — before starting the whole process anew, Lord willing in a slightly wiser direction.

This circular kind of story is the story of the body of Christ: stumbling together, depending on grace, repeatedly ending at the table of communion, and then beginning again.

In my own life, my comic realization came when I began teaching at Dordt College: thirteen years earlier, I had declared I would never set foot in Dordt College, yet there I stood at her door and was welcomed in as a found sheep— or [Schaap](#) as the case might be.

The circular story is a communal story, and it orients us to life in a different way than Upward Mobility: it asks us to dig in together, not with one eye on the horizon, but with an eye for what we have right here before us, asking us to consider how we might make something of *this* place, of *these* people, together. Two of the common manifestations of this type of story are sustainability and local economy. They are old, old stories, and they are biblical stories for a creation that was very good.

The kinds of stories we tell about ourselves matter, and the story patterns that control and direct our lives are powerful forces. It’s time we realize the power of story to colonize our lives and to reorient those stories for service to Christ’s church and to the world he loved, starting with the churches we attend and the places we live right now.