

Truing¹ Our Lives

Exploring the Intersection of Organizational Stories and Bible Stories

by David Specht and Mick Comstock

In this article, the authors reflect on the surprises that emerged during a recent experience of placing organizational stories and bible stories into conversation with each other. In the first part of the article, Specht examines the work of Seeing Things Whole of exploring the relationship of faith to organizational life and performance which led to an experiment of placing organizational stories and biblical stories into conversation with one another. In part two, Comstock reflects on the experience of trying to do this.

Part One:

What Led Us to Explore Organizational Stories and Bible Stories in Light of One Another

For nearly 10 years now Seeing Things Whole has hosted twice-yearly gatherings whose purpose has been to explore the intersection of faith and organizational life. These gatherings and the conversations that have been shared during them have been exceedingly rich. This is due, I believe, in no small measure, to the extraordinary circle of participants who have been moved to participate in this inquiry, a mixture of organizational leaders from a variety of organizational settings, organizational development professionals, and theologians from church and seminary settings. While, from gathering to gathering, we are always welcoming new friends into the circle, there has also been a stable core of participants, and culture which combines a high level of trust with a rigorous spirit of inquiry has emerged.

A shared assumption which has helped to shape both the tone of our inquiry and the way we go about it together has been that exploring the lively relationship of faith to organizational life has very little to do with bringing God into the organizations with which we are involved. Instead our conversations at these gatherings and the larger work of Seeing Things Whole have been significantly

shaped by our conviction that God is very much already present and at work in these organizational settings. Our inquiry, then, has been muchly an attempt over time to catch God at it, an effort to discover the nature of God's relationship to both the great goodness and the significant brokenness and even evil that is present in the organizations where God's people lead and serve.

Because we have begun with this conviction that God is present in these settings, our habit at our gatherings has been to anchor our conversations in real-time case studies offered by the organizational leaders in our circle. We have trusted that these complex narratives of organizational life will offer us glimpses of God which bring new perspective not only to our understanding of our organizations and the complex challenges which face us in these settings, but as well a new vantage

point from which to understand freshly our too-familiar faith traditions and the nature of God's presence, purposes and activity in the world.

Gathering around bible stories and our life stories is the natural setting for the emergence of whatever trueness might be derived from the encounter with sacred scripture. I use the word "trueness" rather than "truth" because what we are after, it seems to me, is far more about the quality of our lives than the correctness of our concepts. The constant gathering of traditional Jewish communities with their rabbis around the Torah and the other sacred writings was more for the "truing" of their lives and the life of their community, than for the correcting of their doctrine.

We begin, then, by spending time with these organizational narratives and the dilemmas they contain: What should we do about the pressure to relocate some of our manufacturing operation to Third World settings? How as a hospital committed to meeting the health care needs of our mixed income community do we manage the pressures of managed care? How do we manage the impacts of the precipitous

drop in revenues on our employees, owners and customers? How do we respond to the pressures for our organization to grow rapidly when rapid growth could put at risk both the culture and quality of service we have taken so much care to develop? Trusting that these stories offer to us a unique window into the life of God's

¹ **TRUE** *tr.verb* [TRUED, TRUING] To bring to conformity with a standard or requirement; form or adjust as with geometrical precision; as, to true a frame or a tool. [<OE. troewe, true, truth] — **TRUE•NESS** *noun*.

world, we then move to reflect theologically on what we have heard.

Over the years of our gatherings this time of theological reflection has been approached from a variety of angles. We have reflected on the organizational story from the perspective of a three-fold model of organizational life that is rooted in the theological understanding of the threefold nature of Christ's ministry. We have drawn upon the Quaker tradition of testimonies, queries and advices in accompanying organizational leaders as they seek to stand under questions posed by their organization's own sacred principles as revealed in their statements of purpose and articulated values. We have sought to discern the living spirit of an organization and to listen in silence for God's word to the organization in this moment. We have reflected on the organization's life and challenges in light of our understandings of Sabbath (notions of sacred space, sacred time, sacred words) and its implications for our everyday lives and work. Each of these approaches to theological reflection has been fruitful in its own way, with the variety of approaches suiting well the richly diverse traditions that our participants bring into the circle and as well our shared curiosity about what insights might emerge from such different approaches.

For some time now, however, there's been another perhaps more obvious approach which we have spoken about repeatedly but until recently had never quite gotten around to trying out. What might happen if we were to draw more directly on biblical narratives as vantage point for our theological inquiry into organizational life? Given that for many Christians bible stories are one of the most familiar and tangible links to their

faith tradition, an approach to theological reflection which features the use of biblical narratives would seem to make a great deal of sense. Our desire was to discover ways of placing the narratives of our faith tradition alongside the narratives of life within our organizations that would permit us to examine each of these stories, both biblical and organizational, in light of the other, inviting them to query one another.

The desire to experience this connection was clear among the participants in our gatherings, and in the abstract anyway, the linkage between the organizational and biblical stories made fundamental sense to us. At the same time, however, we seemed to have an approach-avoidance relationship to the notion, an ambivalence that for me was most clearly articulated by Ed Mosel, a colleague whose own organization has been a participant in many of these gatherings. Ed had actually been one among us who had expressed the hope that we might find a way of drawing more explicitly from the Bible as a resource to our theological reflection. So when at the end of a meeting at his company I indicated to him that we would be attempting to do this at the upcoming retreat where his would be one of two organizations presenting a case study, I was somewhat surprised at his less than wholly-enthusiastic response: "I'll be interested to see what happens," he said.

"You sound a little uncertain," I replied.

"I know," he said. "I've always wanted to experience a clearer relevance between scripture and my work here. My experiences of trying to make this connection have never delivered in the way I had hoped, though."

"What happened?" I asked.

"At times the biblical passage entered the conversation as a

bland confirmation of everything we were experiencing. I also became aware that it is all too easy to match up some line from scripture to virtually any decision we may face at work in a way that offers an overly-simplistic answer. Neither one of those work for me, because I know that there is a whole lot of gray area in the decisions we face, and the promise of black and white answers simply doesn't ring true for me."

"What is it that you would like to see happen?" I asked.

"I'd just like working with the Bible around organizational dilemmas to help our wrestling to take place at a level that is more profound and faithful."

"Fair enough," I replied, having only the very vaguest of notions about how we might attempt to do this.



Part Two:

What Happened When We Tried

In thinking together about how we might best lay the groundwork for a dynamic exchange between organizational stories and bible stories, we decided to allow our planning to be shaped by a couple of principles. The first is that in order for a genuine exchange to take place between organizational stories and biblical stories, the stories had to be on equal footing in our conversation, with each having been considered and engaged on its own basis before referencing the other. As a way of going about this, we determined that each story should be presented and explored in considerable detail, including in both instances information about background and context. The second principle is that the biblical story should be selected not for its capacity to neatly resolve the challenge facing the organization, but for its potential to move our conversation to a deeper level in

creasing the likelihood that we might see things whole.

We decided to begin once again by working with the two organizations that would be presenting case studies, to identify and understand the dilemma that would serve as the focus of their presentation. Once these organizational stories were in hand, we then began to look for companion bible stories which provoked us as readers to wrestle with issues and dynamics that were similarly complex without rushing to offer an answer.

Going into our conversations, I had shared four basic assumptions about theological reflection in general and bible stories in particular and how they work on us. The first was that they provide a *sabbath for the imagination*. That is, they allow a time of recovery from the necessary abstractions of everyday life, enabling us to revisit things we aren't able to attend to because of the pressing urgencies of our work. The most profound possibility is of an experience of what the theologian, Paul Tillich, called our "ultimate concern."

William Willimon was addressing something like this when he wrote: "We have become victims of narratives inadequate for the truthful living of our lives— narratives derived from psychology, economics, sociology, and other secular means of defining ourselves and what happens to us." Engagement of our life stories with biblical stories, at best, allows the emergence of a narrative that is more adequate to the full, multidimensional richness of our truest lives.

A second assumption was that

Organizational Story

The Prodigal Father

David and John represented a financial advisory firm that specializes in working with wealthy clients around the management of their resources in a way that reflects their deepest values. While this firm has been in existence for only several years at this point, its excellent reputation has fueled rapid growth, and has been approached on several occasions by potential buyers.

Because of their intentionally values-based approach to working with clients, David and John occasionally find themselves exploring with a client the apparent lack of alignment between a client's declared values and their decisions around managing their resources. Of the several stories they shared, one in particular came to the foreground in our conversation that day. This particular client had expressed a strong desire to manage his wealth in a way that didn't undermine the maturation of his young-adult children as capable and independent persons, but was at the same time against his better judgment considering giving in to their request for their early access to their inheritance. "He was really sending mixed signals," David recalled. "He was saying one thing while at the same time making plans to do just the opposite. I didn't want to risk losing him as a client, but felt he was preparing to undermine his own best clarity about what would, in the longer term be best for his heirs. How to work with him around this in a way that in the end respects his prerogative to make his own choices and without inappropriately imposing our own personal values can get pretty tricky."

Bible Story

The Prodigal Son

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' "

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

Luke 15:11-32

bible stories are capable of surprising us, of tricking us out of the god-like omniscience of readers who, because they've read it before, already know the story and how it comes out. We tend to paint our memories in broad strokes, but "God (or the devil!) is in the details" which surface again and again to haunt us as we return to the stories. This can be very distressing. It can also open us up again to new possibilities, to mystery and maybe even to the living God.

A third assumption was that the two main characters in all of these narratives, ourselves and God, are absent in the stories themselves, and only become present as we read them and struggle with them. The characters we meet in these tales have been dead for a long time, but the stories have *us* in mind, and our relationship with the living God in our own place and time. We are prepared to see this because we have begun with organizational stories, which are so conspicuously our own, and we have taken pains to declare our conviction that in these settings God is very much alive and well.

The fourth assumption was that a gathering such as ours around bible stories and our life stories is the natural setting for the emergence of what ever trueness might possibly be derived from the encounter with sacred scripture. I used the word "trueness" rather than "truth" because what we are after, it seems to me, is far more about the quality of our lives than the correctness of our concepts. The constant gathering of the men in traditional Jewish communities with their rabbis around the Torah and the other sacred writings was more for the "truing" of their lives and the life of their community, than for the correcting of their doctrine.

Organizational Story The Cost of Doing Business

Ed's organization designs and manufactures high tech components for automobile manufacturers with GM, Chrysler, and Ford - the Big Three - as their primary customers. The challenge he presented was how best to manage relationship between his company and these major customers which had become increasingly predatory. Each of the Big Three, in the face of increasing competitive pressures from other car manufacturers from around the world, had sought to maintain its profitability in large part through a rigorous effort to control its own costs by demanding that its suppliers consistently reduce the cost of the components they produced. In addition to initially acquiring a new contract through a highly competitive bidding process, suppliers were required to pay a fee of several hundred thousand dollars at the time of being awarded a contract, and while agreeing also to reduce the cost of their product by an additional 3-5% during each year of the contract.

Initially, the pressure to reduce costs drove a process of refining their manufacturing process to eliminate costly inefficiencies. "To be honest," Ed recalled, "the expectation that we tighten up our process, while demanding a lot of work on our part, was a good thing for us to do. Our metrics have never been better. Once this had been achieved, however, in order to deliver the ongoing cost concessions stipulated in the contracts, Ed's company found itself having to significantly reduce funding for ongoing research and product development and employee training. It wasn't long before this loss of profitability began to negatively impact employee compensation. The negative impact on employee morale was obvious, and as Ed and others witnessed other suppliers first struggle and then go out of business, it became increasingly clear that it would be impossible to run a healthy business over time under the present arrangement.

Bible Story The Talents

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'
Matthew 25: 14-30

On Saturday night after we had concluded our conversations about organizational and biblical stories, I had to make the two-hour return drive to Charlemont and arrive ready to preach the next morning. To make that possible I had chosen *The Prodigal* as my text, figuring that I would get plenty of help from the other participants because we would be spending a lot of time together with that story at the retreat. Little did I know how true this would be. I went home scratching my head about the struggle we had engaged in together, trying to figure out what was at stake in that story, and in the story of *The Talents*, that made us all so stubborn, beyond the fact that the Bible tends to have that effect on people.

As I remember it, our struggle was largely around the question of power, both human and divine, and how it is exercised. We wrestled together about whether or not the powerful characters in the stories, the father in *The Prodigal* and the master in *The Talents*, were good, and whether or not the weak characters, the younger son and the one-talent man, were bad. A few of us were arguing that those powerful characters weren't necessarily good. Others were pretty adamant that they were not only good, but even that they represented God, and therefore, while the younger son didn't deserve what he got, the one-talent man certainly did. If I remember correctly nobody budged!

While I was driving I tried to think about our struggle in terms of the four assumptions that had framed our discussion. Were we arguing about something of ultimate concern? How was our omniscience being challenged? How were we in our argument being addressed by the stories? To what

were we being true in our mutual stubbornness?

Then I thought about something I'd learned from thirty years experience in the church: Whenever an argument goes on for a long time and nobody budges it's usually because everyone is right. Everyone is defending something that needs defending. Once this is realized, the trick is to try to find a perspective from which both sides of the argument can be seen to be true.

Usually after you've left an argument you win it with what you should have said. Armed with these thoughts, however, I went back into our struggle and found myself arguing the opposite side against myself! This was pretty disconcerting. But, staying with it, I found myself at the very roots of my own faith, confronted with my own ultimate concern.

This is the best way I can express that faith and that concern: Because I know myself to be fallible and yet, at my best, struggling to be both as good as possible and as honest as possible, I yearn deeply for and affirm God as like the father who would, without fail, see me coming from afar and embrace me with joy and forgiveness as I repented and returned from a journey into self-delusion and sin in hopes of renewing my life. Because I, also, count on this to be true, I understand deeply the fierceness with which many of you defended the father's behavior as we worked and played with this story of *The Prodigal Son*. I had forgotten my own faith in the heat of our argument, and thus have experienced, in reflecting on it, a sabbath for my own imagination.

And so also with our argument about *The Talents*. I remember the passion with which several

participants at once said, as I complained about the outrageously cruel response of the master, "Life is like that! Work is like that sometimes!" And so it is, and so is mine. And just because of that I have in my bones the powerful yearning for a hand on my shoulder, in the middle and at the end of my life, and for a voice saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and a fear of the fear that might cause that not to happen.

Were it not for the organizational stories shared by David and John and Ed, I could happily admit defeat and we could stop at this point. However, it is just these stories, at least as I experienced them, that won't let us off the hook so easily. John and David's story concerned their efforts to help a father protect both his wealth and his children by *not* behaving like the father did in beginning of *The Prodigal*. And at the center of Ed's story was the moment he realized that for the sake of his company he, in the spirit of the one-talent man, had to take the risk of saying, "No!" and maybe, "You're trying to reap where you haven't sown," to his largest supplier's demand for further cost-cutting.

If the father in *The Prodigal* is like God, shouldn't David have counseled this father to imitate him? If the powerful figure in *The Talents* is like God, shouldn't Ed, as a person of faith, have persisted in attempting to accede to his very powerful customer's demands?

The answer to both questions is, "Of course not! The wealthy father in John and David's story is not God. And Ford Motor Company in Ed's story is not God." We're willing and able to make discriminations among the powerful persons and organizations in our lives that many of us were

reluctant to make in our approach to the bible stories. To put this theologically, we are somewhat less likely to commit idolatry in real life than we are in sacred stories.

Idolatry has two faces. First of all, it is to attribute divinity to someone or something that is not God. Secondly, it is to attribute characteristics to God that are not god-like. I think we've been in danger of doing both in our response to *The Prodigal* and *The Talents*.

When we read these stories literally there is nothing in them, except their presence in Holy Scripture, to indicate that the father and the master might represent God. The father is just a father; the master is just a master. Neither of these characters is perfect by any means, the master in the talents actually shows signs of positive evil, but nevertheless we meet something in both of them that touches our deepest yearning and, for people of faith, our most profound conviction that in God our yearning is fulfilled. In order to be both good and God, God *must* be one who welcomes us back when we have become lost, and *must* be one who honors our work in the world with judgment, and so, faith testifies, God *is*.

It is for this reason that the traditional *allegorical* interpretation of these stories has had such power, not just for us but for Christians of every age. Each element in an allegorical story is understood to stand for something else, and interpretation involves a kind of decoding, finding what each element stands for. In an allegorical reading of these parables, the powerful characters become as God for us, and the weaker characters become as ourselves. Interpreted this way these stories

enshrine the deepest truths of how it is between God and ourselves.

But always the details return to haunt us if we read the stories with care. Paying close attention to them, we find that we have bought our reassurance at a very high price. For, in creating our allegories we have attributed characteristics to God that are also

possessed by every two-bit despot that has ever walked the face of the earth. The ability to arbitrarily indulge and enrich your favorites just because you want to, the power to reward your subjects or punish them outrageously on a whim, these are among the things that make it worthwhile to *be* a tyrant.

The oppressors in our history have always loved this likeness to God, and have justified their acts of injustice with it. And that likeness has, I fear, made us more prone to bow the knee to arbitrary power, less likely to recognize and resist tyranny, whether it appears in our families, our organizations (including our churches), our communities, or our politics. This is the reason for my own stubbornness as we struggled together with these stories.

I believe that because we wrestled *together* we were able to achieve a sabbath for our imaginations that allowed us to experience the power of the fierce yearning for, sturdy conviction of, and clearer articulation of two aspects of God's love: forgiveness and judgment. At the same time, it has engaged us with the profound danger of the idolization of power that the very fulfillment of that yearning and the reassurance of

that conviction throws us into the danger that we just might worship any power that promises to give us what we need.

God *must* be one who welcomes us back when we have become lost, and *must* be one who honors our work in the world with judgment.

In the process we were haunted with the specter, familiar through both our lived experience and our reading of scripture, of one whose love serves only the purposes of his power and who judges in order to terrify. But I believe that our struggle has also brought us

to the threshold of an understanding of God as One whose power serves the purposes of his love, and that when we, or our work, or our organizations are judged, we are judged by One who loves us.



Penultimate Conclusions and Questions

It is clear that our experiences of organizational life can indeed offer us a vantage point that brings rich and provocative perspective to our reading and understanding of bible stories. Placing these texts into direct conversation with the concrete and complex challenges that are part of our daily experience in our organizations can, at least initially, be disorienting, posing entirely new questions to these familiar stories.

As we reflected back on the experience of our wrestling together, however, we found ourselves wondering if the biblical stories in these conversations had spoken as illuminatively to the organizational challenges with which they had been paired. The organizational stories had dramatically shaped our understanding of the stories of *The Talents* and *The Prodigal Son*. But had these two biblical texts been as helpful in enabling us to move to fresh un-

derstandings of our organizations and the challenges that await us in these settings?

Put another way, what does all of this mean if we assume that the most important outcomes of our wrestling have more to do with the truing of both our lives and the lives of our organizations than they do with the attainment of correct doctrine? Does this have any relevance for the most important characters in this process — God and us, here and now?

In thinking about this question, we quickly concluded that this recollection could not be complete without inviting our organizational partners to reflect with us. So we did just that, asking David and John and Ed to reflect on any ways in which the wrestling with bible stories may have reshaped their understanding of their organizations. Despite the fact that our question met them in the midst of the fullness of their work weeks, all three were quick to respond.

“I thought the Scripture and discussion *did* inform our thinking at work,” reflected David, “in that I was carried into deeper thinking about the relationships involved and what roles we were playing with one another.”

“And I found myself reflecting in new ways, based on our work with *The Talents*, about how power can and does get exercised at work and within our organizations,” reflected John.

“I also found myself attaching real world actors to the characters in the parable of *The Talents*,” said Ed. “For instance, thinking of Ford as the power figure, the master in this story is really quite interesting, because it begins to set off a series of *what if* questions that get invite us into a whole new examination of the issue of how we relate to them. I also found the notion of wrestling with scripture as an exercise in the truing of our lives to be quite helpful in enabling me to step back from my wish that the outcome would be a singular piece of wisdom that

speaks directly to our dilemma. The benefit really is in the wrestling.”

Bringing organizational stories and bible stories together in this way, it seems, occasions ferment in both directions, giving rise to feelings of both excitement and risk. In our willingness to stand under the questions that these narratives pose to one another, we discover that God awaits us in the complexity. ■

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