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Harding School of Theology

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Footnotes: Stories We Tell

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Footnotes¹

¹Curated Resources for Ministers



FOOTNOTES--Season Two

Welcome back to *Footnotes*. That was a nice summer break, but it is good to find a rhythm again. I considered publishing a few issues from vacation, but I then realized that you didn't want to read my poorly edited thoughts from road trips (or my definitive rankings of truck stop snack offerings along I-40/I-65). But the small break gave me a chance to get ahead and plan some really solid issues that will enrich your ministry during the coming months.

Today I'd like to consider the genre of story. Isn't it interesting that when God becomes flesh to dwell among us he chooses to speak in stories? It didn't have to be this way. He could've used proclamations, constitutions, decrees, or ordinances. He could've recommended best practices, next steps, turnkey solutions, and deliverables. **Instead, Jesus imagined fields, weddings, vineyards, and messy homes that feature characters like masters, servants, bridegrooms, virgins, and priests who face adversity related to inheritances, loss, fear, and preoccupation.** Way more interesting than another night at the Zoning Commission.

We love stories because we live stories. This is why we routinely ask our kids to tell us what happened at school, but probably won't bother requesting the minutes to the school board meeting. It is why we attend weddings, yet never browse the files of the county clerk. And you've probably spent countless hours listening to eulogies but have never once asked to read the autopsy. We live and breathe stories. They come in different packages: sometimes in the latest Netflix binge or an overtime football game or Instagram feed. But regardless of how they are delivered, they are basically the same thing. They are settings, plots, characters, conflicts, and resolutions. And they are the precise language that will speak to our heart and the hearts of those to whom we minister.

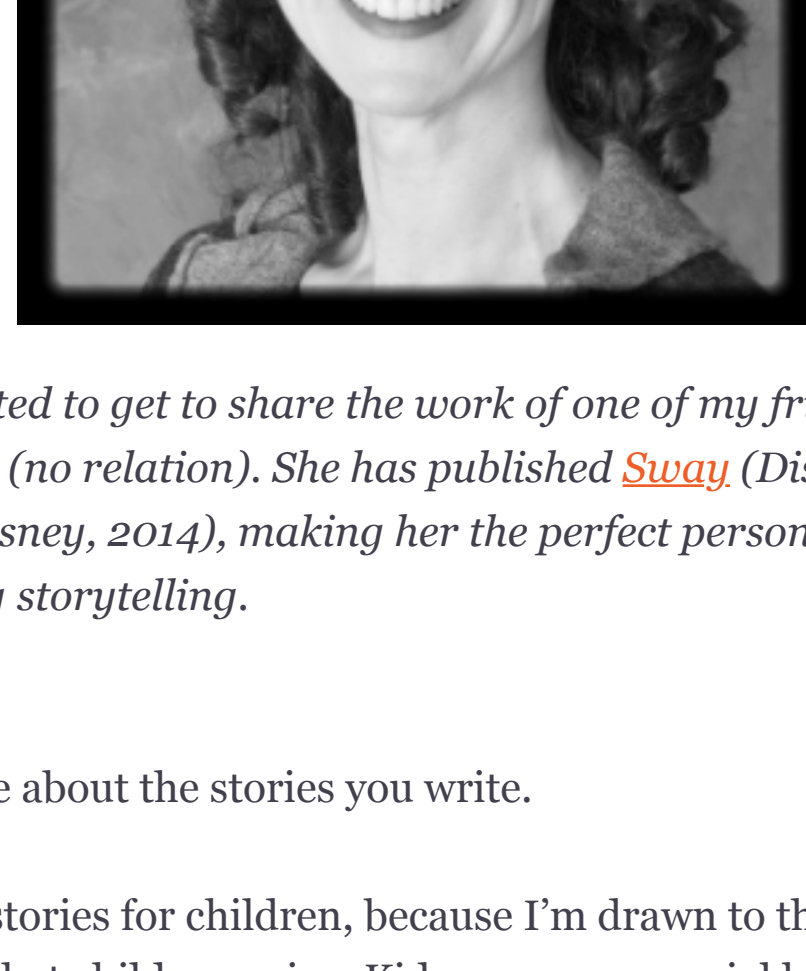
So let's get to it. I think you're going to love this issue. It includes:

- an interview with a writer of children's fiction
- book recommendations on the parables
- a brief rundown of the issues at Duke Divinity School
- More Footnotes

Welcome back!

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A Conversation with Amber McRee Turner



I'm really excited to get to share the work of one of my friends Amber McRee Turner (no relation). She has published [Sway](#) (Disney, 2013) and [Circa Now](#) (Disney, 2014), making her the perfect person to help us understand storytelling.

BT: Tell a little about the stories you write.

AMT: I write stories for children, because I'm drawn to the not-yet-cynical status that children enjoy. Kids possess a special brand of resilience that is fueled by imagination. Often, because of that, their eyes are more open to the magic in the mundane, which inspires me. I really take Romans 1:20 to heart..."For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." I expend a lot of energy noticing details and assigning meaning to them. The Morse code sound of a chicken pecking a garbage can. The way dried-up worms spell out letters on the sidewalk. I guess it's what you might call the brain version of hoarder disorder. I keep all the things. I'm pretty sure some of the people that love me find it exhausting, but truly, I can't help it. The stories I write are a safety deposit box for those very things.

BT: What is it about fictional story that draws you to this work? Why not write another genre, like cookbooks or presidential biographies?

AMT: That's an easy one. My scenes are doorstops, I'd rather step on Legos than discuss politics, and sometimes I feel more like a Muppet than a person. They say write what you know.

BT: Do you intend for your stories to have a moral?

AMT: Yes. I very much intend for everything I write to convey a moral. The challenge is restraint when it comes to that. It's a subtlety I'm still trying to master. In children's literature, the kiss of death is being too "on-the-nose" with your message. If we are what we eat/read, then a well-crafted and morally sound work of fiction is like hiding kale in the brownies.

BT: I went to public high school in the Midwest. We never heard of kale and that wasn't health food people were baking into the brownies.

AMT: But think about GREEN EGGS AND HAM. It was written by Dr. Seuss as an exercise in utilizing as few different words as possible. It rhymes. It's relentlessly repetitive. And yet woven tightly throughout the entire story are themes of persistence, patience, and versatility. Brilliant.

BT: That is a really good point. Jesus uses repetition a lot in his parables, such as the Parable of the Talents. But I feel like preachers struggle to tell stories in such a structured, intentional way.

AMT: I can only speak to what sticks to me as the hearer of a sermon. Details, bite-sized vulnerabilities. **If you've exhausted your own, then use another person's.** I connect and I remember when a teacher pulls something out of the vault. He listens to Jim Nabors records in the mornings. He's terrified of ostriches. He was devastated when his high school letter jacket melted in the dryer. It's a bridge, a conduit for bigger truths to come on over.

BT: Okay. Now the hard part: talk about your process/discipline. What tricks do you have for those of us who should be writing more yet "can't find the time?"

AMT: This question makes me snort out a little coffee. I'm not disciplined at all when it comes to writing, and I've only become a student of process with the newest story I've begun. My writing routine consists of sitting down at the laptop, repeating to myself *Who in the world am I kidding?!* Then I write a page or two or three, quit while I'm ahead, and reward myself with a pastry.

BT: This is exactly how I feel about sermon-writing. The process can be painful. We fall in love with the first thing we put on paper, and yet know that it isn't finished.

AMT: Yes. In novel-writing, they say you're either a "plotter or a pantsler," meaning you either meticulously plan the structure of your story, or you fly by the seat of your pants. I began my writing career as a pantsler, because truthfully, I write because I'm completely enamored with the words themselves. For years, the focus of my writing was the rhythm and music of the words, the cadence of the sentences. The poetry of it. **But then sometimes you learn the hard way that no matter how lovely the telling of it, having something worth telling is a crucial part of the equation.**

BT: This is kinda where I think preachers and church leaders live. Most are pretty decent talkers. But I'm not sure we've tapped into the true art of telling a story.

AMT: God designed people to love a meaningful story. If you have time, look up the seven basic plot structures used by nearly every popular story throughout all of history.

BT: I remember Donald Miller talking about this [[find it here](#)].

AMT: They all originate in Jesus' story. God instilled a need for those themes in us from the beginning. So now, I'm a student of letting the words serve the story, instead of the opposite. I have a lot to learn.

BT: I'm hearing you say we need to study stories before we learn to tell them. So, give us a few recommendations:

AMT: We are never too old for the beautifully and concisely conveyed truths in children's picture books. Some of my current favorites are:

1. THE BOOK OF MISTAKES by Corinna Luyken
2. WHAT WAS I SCARED OF? by Dr. Seuss
3. YELLOW AND PINK by William Steig
4. LEONARDO THE TERRIBLE MONSTER by Mo Willems
5. THE INVENTION OF HUGO CABRET by Brian Selznick

BT: What do you wish preachers focused more on when they preached/interpreted the stories in the Bible?

AMT: The infinite wonder of every last bit of what God has created. The importance of that word in verb form: to wonder. The power of imagination when it comes to biblical study. The celebration of all the mystery in scripture. The beauty and okay-ness of what we don't know, but will someday. An acknowledgement of how God reveals himself to us as vividly in flakes of snow, clumps of brown sugar, and the strumming of minor chords as he does through the words of the Bible. **The fact that His authorship is far more immense than what is inked.**

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Resources on Parables

I've spent the summer working through the parables with Rodney Plunket in our preaching series at White Station. Here are some of my recommendations...in parable style.

Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment*. Eerdmans. 2002. **There was a book that was superbly written, humorous, and fun to read. Of all of the scholars who have taken up the parables, he is the most creative.**

Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. IVP. 2012. **Once a scholar sat down to compose a book that was really helpful for someone writing a term paper, but less helpful for one preaching a sermon.**

Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*. Harper. 2014. **She read the stories and re-told them with vigor and creativity. The people did not always receive her. But she was interesting, nonetheless--especially in her re-telling of the Lost things of Luke 15.**

David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*. WJKP. 2000. **A certain man gave solid scholarly and homiletic suggestions for preachers handling the parables. But blessed is he also for devoting space to Jesus's most confusing parable, the Shrewd Manager.**

Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories filled with Intent*. Eerdmans. 2008. **He produced the most pages with the most words. It ran the risk of being too thick and needing long paragraphs to describe short stories. But it paid off in the end. It was more helpful than most others.**

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Problems at Duke

I'm not sure if you've been following the fall out at Duke Divinity School, but there has been pretty extensive coverage. Over the past three years, there have been allegations against the dean for anti-Muslim bias, allegations against a professor of blatant racism, and allegations against the new dean for discrimination against students who are LGBTQ. Simply: they've had a lot going on. Let's start at the top:

- In 2015, Dean Richard Hays (highly regarded scholar and faith leader) **resigned for reasons connected to his personal health.** Yet earlier that year **he responded** to ugly challenges from the campus community regarding the use of the Duke Chapel for a Muslim call to prayer. In 2016, Elaine Heath took over as Dean.
- Move forward to 2017, which witnessed a string of email exchanges on the topic of racial equality, featuring a **feud between J. Paul Griffiths and Anthea Portier-Young.** Griffiths eventually resigned and shared **his take on the whole thing.** (I'm reminded of another **Duke prof who came under fire** for going Clint-Eastwood-Gran-Torino in his comments to the *New York Times*).
- This brings us to 2018, when a recent ceremony was **hijacked by protests** regarding LGBTQ equality. The **demands** included 15 items, including everything from better scholarships for LGBTQ students and the hiring of transgender professors to teach courses in that specific area.

I target this newsletter at ministers, so the application for our congregational work may not be obvious here. But I think these sorts of conversations are incredibly important for our ministries, both in churches and universities. Each of these conflicts share a few things in common:

1. a perceived justice struggle of a group that has, to some degree, a story of marginalization,
2. a tension between institutional *identity* and *relevance*,
3. a challenge to traditional models of authority,
4. a problem of communication and how old institutions struggle to keep up with new forms of media.

Every church group will handle such conversations differently. But it seems pretty obvious that all of us will have them.

Oh, and maybe this is a good time to say this: support your local seminary and help keep it awesome.

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A Few More Footnotes

1. Want a better brain? [Say thank you more often.](#)
2. "Hey Pete, I'm awfully proud for knowing you." An [NPR editor returns](#) home to the Mahoning Valley for her class reunion.
3. The [death of the humanities](#) on college campuses.
4. Improve social infrastructure, [support your local library.](#)
5. Humorous guide to trying to find a [church on vacation.](#)

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FOOTNOTES HELPS CHURCH LEADERS DISCOVER THE RESOURCES THAT WILL IMPROVE AND SUSTAIN THEIR MINISTRIES. IT WILL REGULARLY FEATURE INTERVIEWS, BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS, SITE REVIEWS, AND EDITORIALS. IT IS A PROJECT OF BOB TURNER. YOU CAN DIRECT ANY QUESTIONS OR FEEDBACK TO rjturner@harding.edu. COMPLAINTS CAN BE SENT TO HIS Juno account.

UPCOMING
September 24
Faith of our Neighbors

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