

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
5 March, 2010
"Calling All Unicorns"
Word Count: 750

Lately, we've decided to wean ourselves from object lessons. They have their place, but they also have their limits

We invite the kids forward during the early part of worship. They sit on the front pew or chancel steps. We perform our object lesson. Perhaps you've seen the type: the Bible's a roadmap; you're a radio that functions only when plugged into God's power; God is the flashlight of love and you're polished mirrors reflecting the light.

But not all kids get it. Not all know how to use a map. Worse, Dad junks the flashlight when its bulb breaks. Worse, Mom scolds you to stay away from the socket because electricity can kill you.

Our lessons smelled of cattle prodded through the chute toward the abattoir. Prescriptions. Proscriptions. No descriptions. They were as stifling as outcome based education.

Those sweet infidels caught on. We had taken an abstract concept and locked it into a concrete. We turned an idea into a thing. We forfeited imagery conjured by ear for images imprinted by eye.

They weren't imagining. They were regurgitating. They were anticipating what they expected we wanted them to know. Clever little things. They caught on. We weren't encouraging creative belief, we were manufacturing religious automatons.

We began figuring this out when we'd prompt them to tell us the meaning of the lesson. So accustomed to being told, in unison they'd shrug, sigh, reply, recite, "God is love."

We decided to replace object lessons with stories. Do our kids still hear the old stories? Mother Goose? Grimm's

Fairy Tales (the real ones)? Paddington Bear? Beatrix Potter? Winnie the Pooh? Have they heard the story of John Henry, steel driving man? Or Oliver Twist? Or the ancient Greek myths, such as Daedalus and Icarus, thick with layered truths? When I visit one of our elementary schools, my first graders surround me and greedily clamor for me to tell them the sad story. By 'sad story' they mean the tale of musician Orpheus and beautiful Eurydice. Orpheus descends to Hades to reclaim his dead Eurydice so they can love again. Just before they ascend to the land of the living, he loses her. His beloved fades from his grasp. Orpheus never sings again.

Who would have thought this ancient tale would stir the souls of these first graders? Could it be because they're hungry for nuance and genuine emotional depth? They starve for meaning because we feed them instead the thin gruel of stories sanitized and cleansed, where every plot ends with a moral and a happy ending, followed by an advertisement to buy something. Just like life, right?

Besides, if they travel to Disney and ride on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, will they enjoy realizing who originally created Mr. Toad and wrote The Wind in the Willows?

There's a poet whose trendy little poem, "Advice to a Young Poet," has gained some currency. The poem, in its entirety, reads: "Never pretend to be a unicorn by sticking a plunger on your head."

Hmmm. Really? Why not, I ask?

Once upon a time I pretended to be a unicorn to amuse my children, myself, and my very silly Labrador. I stuck a suction cup toy my forehead. I bounced around for hours playing with the kids with that thing wagging, wiggling from my forehead. I was a unicorn. I was a rhinoceros. I was Inigo Montoya. Of course, when I finally did pry the toy off, there remained in the middle of my forehead a perfectly round red spot 2 inches in diameter. It lasted two weeks. It helps to have no pride. My congregation thought it funny. That bobbing red spot held their attention. They didn't listen to a word I said; they found the red circle hypnotic.

What are you reading to your kids? Are you reading anything at all to them? For that matter, what are you reading now? Is your nose in a book?

I'm still practicing my New Year's 'Resolution' to think less and imagine more. There's way too much uncritical, uncreative, linear thinking going on these days, especially since brains unfortunately are attached to tongues. I see Dr. Seuss smiling.

Tell me, which is truer: Yertle's burped induced fall from his turtle throne or a CNN update? Which is truer: Michelangelo's Pieta or a bloody movie about Jesus? Tell me, please, which is more exciting: unwrapping layers of meaning or boxing them in with one bland definitive answer? Here, let me tell you a story...