

# TRUE MYTH: WHY DO WE TELL STORIES?

*Loralee Dyck*

*Once upon a time...*

*Sing in me Muse and  
through me tell the story...*

*In a hole in the ground, there  
lived a hobbit...*

Perhaps you've heard these lines before. They are a signal. They tell us something is coming, something strange and beautiful, something wild and imaginative. But how often do they say anything new? You know how they're going to end, and what things could happen, *must* happen. As myth, they echo what already exists within each of us – the bigger story, the "true myth," as C. S. Lewis calls it. The story we all know: "In the beginning was the Word..."

Why do we tell stories? As a writer of fantasy who's studied medieval and classical myth, I've often heard Christians ask, "So what's that good for?" Shouldn't I be studying the Bible, or telling people about Jesus, or practising better financial stewardship? While these are noble pursuits, my answer is *no*. I do what I do because I'm convinced there's nothing more essential to human nature than telling stories.

We are created in the

image of Creator God; we are God-breathed. It's only natural that we would long to create. Our spirits are not content with eating and sleeping and reproducing, as the animals do. We are made for more. We are made for an eternal kingdom that never dies. Our imaginations are designed to connect with each other, and with God, in loving and holy communion. Every time I pray, I am speaking to God about my story – what I did or didn't do, what I long for, the people I care about. Every time we open our mouths, we are weaving narratives from the endless minuscule events of our lives.

Yet if we only spoke about ourselves, our vision would become

narrow and selfish. Stories that are about *other* people open our imaginations. When I read of Helen in *The Iliad*, lamenting that "in all wide Troy / no one is left who will defend me, none," I am moved to pity. Helen



△ "Helen on the Walls of Troy," by Frederic Leighton, 1865.



△ "The Return of the Prodigal Son," by Rembrandt, circa 1668.

structure. Take, for example, the greatest parable of all, which begins, "There was a man who had two sons." The story never happened. There was never an actual father who split his inheritance and watched his youngest son run off into ruin. And yet don't we *feel* the truth in this story? Don't we yearn with the father for the return of his son? Don't we celebrate with the exuberance of the homecoming? This story is true because it echoes the greater Story. It speaks of sacrifice, death, and rebirth – redemption into new life.

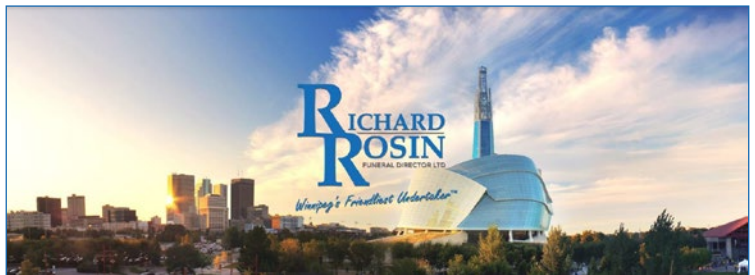
Likewise with myth. In his poem, "Mythopoeia," J. R. R. Tolkien writes, "The heart of man is not compound of lies, / but draws some wisdom from the only Wise." We all

becomes to me all mourners and exiles, all who are trapped in war and regret. I learn to see from another's perspective, to feel another's pain, to think as they do. A good story catches and holds us. Like Coleridge's wedding guest in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, our minds are compelled to sympathy, and we leave "sadder and wiser." Stories teach us about each other, and, by stepping into them, our views are challenged.

So far so good, you might think, but why not stick to *true* stories? Ones that actually happened? History, news, and biography can do the same thing – can't they? All stories can be powerful, but myth goes further.

Consider the ministry of

Jesus. Much of his teaching was done through parables: stories that were made up, often fairy-tale-like in their



*It's all about relationships...*

**I believe that creating relationships under many circumstances is the essence of trust and a natural ability to rely up one another when needed.**

**You may not need me for many years, but when you do, I'll be here.**

*Richard.*

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have access to God's revelation. We draw from eternal truths, stories that resonate in us deeper than facts. Odin, the All-Father of Norse mythology, sacrifices "himself to himself" upon Yggdrasil, the great gallows tree of the world. The Greek god Dionysius is killed and reborn. The Cree hero Wisakedjak, against all hope, remakes a flooded world with the muskrat's tiny clod of earth. Time and again, myth tells the Great Story, if not in whole, then in part. By partaking of these myths, our spirits are stirred up towards God.

Myth is necessary

because it calls us higher. In our world of flat consumerism and cheap entertainment, it's easy to be drowned in mundanity and lose the spark of our calling. We are told to grow up, to be practical, to get a real job. In fact, we are trading the glories of reality for a lesser existence. When confronted by the derogatory accusation of "escapist" literature, Tolkien responds in "On Fairy Stories": "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?" Tolkien longed to reach beyond the horrors of war and human

"progress" to a place of true beauty, and so he did by writing stories of courage, redemption, and hope in the midst of anguish. These are the high qualities of humanity, and, as Lewis writes in "On Stories," "by dipping them in myth we see them more clearly."

Myth reminds us of who we really are. This is the greatest calling of humanity: to press our spirits on towards God by whatever means possible. To reach, as Lewis said in *The Last Battle*, "further up and further in" towards the everlasting Kingdom. 



△ "Wisakedjak" at the MosiaCanada 150 sculpture garden in Jacques Cartier Park in Gatineau, Quebec.



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