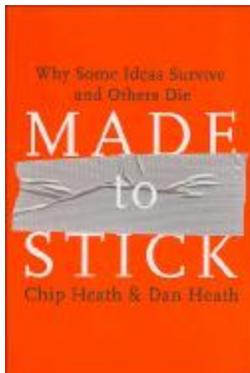


Story:

Reversing the Curse of the Expert

by Brian K. Rice



If there is a lesson for communicators to take away from [Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die](#), it is “the curse of the expert” or “the curse of knowledge.”

What the Heath brothers (authors of the book) mean by this is that most leaders, teachers, and communicators suffer from the curse of knowing too much about their field of expertise or profession. Well, that isn't exactly the problem. The problem is that those who know so much forget how little the non-experts know. And then they/we fail to communicate in “sticky ways” to this “non-expert audience.”

The expert (leader, teacher, etc.) lives in a specialized world of facts, knowledge, details, information, theory, and concepts that the average person knows nothing of. But for the expert - those facts, etc. are the stuff of life. Those ideas are the tools of their trade. For the that information is communicated in ways that are irrelevant, obscure and therefore boring and forgotten.

What is the leader-teacher-communicator-expert to do?



Well, the Heath brothers, as well as Annette Simmons, recommend the use of STORY as one way to have sticky communication. Story is one helpful way to escape “the curse of the expert.”



I continue to have conversations with people who are reading [The Shack](#) by William Young. They are not only reading it. They are buying copies to give to their friends. Most of the people reading the book become “raving fans” of the book. It's become a best seller. Why? I suspect it is because it is a story of relationship with God told in a story format. By that I mean there is a plot, characters (and one in particular that we come to identify with), tragedy, some suspense and a grace-filled ending. What C.S. Lewis talks about as eucastrophe or the “good ending” (they lived happily ever after, or in blessedness forever and ever, world without end, a-men).

In that format, all kinds of deep theological issues are explored and discussed. People who would never read a theology textbook are getting theology through a

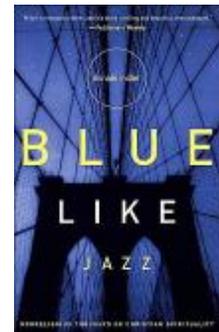
story. I have a Th.M. degree in systematic theology. I have read hundreds of books on theology. At the core of that collection is about thirty different systematic theology books (some of the definitive works in multiple volumes from the last 100 years). Trust me on this next statement. If I would pull any one of those books off the shelf and give it to the typical “non-theology-expert” (i.e. the average person in the average pew) who is reading [the Shack](#), they probably wouldn’t make it to page ten. Maybe if we wrote [Theology for Dummies](#), no better make that [Theology for Complete Idiots](#), they would get to page thirty.

But these same people are reading and rereading [The Shack](#) and theologizing while doing so. Now, we could debate how good the theology is in [The Shack](#), but we can do that about any theology textbook. So, the issue (here) is not - how good is the theology. The issue is that people (non-experts) are actually reading and learning and thinking about theology because it is conveyed in a story so that the ideas stick.



Don Miller! Chances are - you’ve heard of him. He was one of the “pray’ers” at the Democratic Convention. Why? Is he the pastor of a mega-church? Nope. Is he the founder of a greatly influential organization working for social change? Nah. Is he a denominational big-wig? Not that either. He is a story teller who has done so through a series of autobiographical works,

the most famous being, [Blue Like Jazz](#).



[Blue Like Jazz](#) is a story well told. In Miller’s case it autobiography that is a bit self-deprecating, whimsical, truth seeking, hopeful, vulnerable and one that huge numbers of fans relate with. I loved the book. I read it in almost one setting. I felt like I was living his story right along with him. In his story, he explored the meaning of some of the big questions of life and faith. And those ideas stuck.

And of course there is Brian McLaren; the postmodern, emergent, prolific author who made postmodernism a household concept with his book, [A New Kind of Christian](#). For this one, McLaren used a narrative format. He created a story. Maybe it is better to say, he created a series of conversations between two fictional characters and wove them together in the semblance of a story. It wasn’t a very good story, nor was the story that well told. But, still, it was a story and it was useful to communicate lots of significant ideas. And it (deservedly) garnered a large audience. I really don’t think it would have had the same influence if he had written a textbook on postmodern, emergent ideas (even though he is a good writer).



Leaders, teachers, communicators of any stripe (all of the experts) need to pay attention to the tools of the trade that can be used to tell sticky ideas that take root, stay around and make a difference.

Story is one of the most important tools in the communicator's toolbox. I recently heard a well-known speaker criticizing the new emphasis on "story" and contrasting it with expositional teaching (which was what he said was the gospel and which people really need). I kind of scratch my head and wonder - isn't the very word "gospel" or good news, referring to the story of God with us? I don't see propositional statements and story/narrative as in opposition to one another. They can exist alongside one another in dynamic interplay.

By the way, the expository preacher who was speaking at a conference on preaching used lots of stories to illustrate every one of his points. Go figure!!!

But that discussion is not the focus of this article or the point that follows . . . which is . . .

You are going to have to do some work to become good at story telling. It is not easy to tell a good story. Don't make the mistake of assuming that every story is a good story.



- I've heard some pretty boring stories.
- I've heard interesting stories told in manipulative ways.
- I've heard some potentially good stories told in stumbling ways.
- I've heard some stories that were okay, but could have soared to excellence with some more attention and skill.

So there I was, yawning, having to work at paying attention to the speaker. I glanced around the room and saw others were having similar experiences. Some had already checked out. Others were fidgeting and distracted. And the speaker, at the moment, was telling a story! It wasn't a good story, nor was it a story well told.

Do you remember the old bumper sticker?

A Bad Day of Fishing Still Beats a Good Day of Work...

Sometimes I think we believe:

A Bad Story Poorly Told Still Beats a Good Expository Message...

But it doesn't. People want to hear **good stories, well told!** Bad stories or poorly told stories are not going to grab their attention, nor settle into their memory.

Like everything else, to become a good story teller, you are going to have to do some hard work. I want to recommend a "mentor" who through her books, can help you become a better story teller. The mentor is:

Annette Simmons.



If you want help in becoming a better story teller, you can get an introduction to story in Made to Stick. But if you really want to go a lot further, definitely check out either (or preferably both) of the books by Annette Simmons



Start with the Story Factor. In this book you were learn the basics (and more) of what a good story is and how to become a good story teller. As you would expect, the book is full of stories, well told.

I found this book wonderfully helpful. My copy is filled with notes, observations, ideas. In particular, chapter four, "How to Tell a Good Story" was a valuable summary of the aspects of story telling.

Then, move on to Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins. Part one is a little repetitious of the Story Factor, but

Part two is a step by step process that helps you discover your story, write it and tell it. It is very good. In fact, if anyone is working as a mentor or spiritual director, this is a great tool to help mentorees and directees discover their story.



Don't just read the books, but put into practice what you are learning from the books. You really will become a better story teller, only if you have lots of practice in telling the story you discover.

And then, learn to tell God's Story, your story, the story of others in sticky ways.

Brian K. Rice
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