

“Scripture by Heart”: A Course Description
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This is a course that focuses on learning and performing scriptural passages as a way to understand them and to tell them. I share this description of a single course because it is so different from any other course I have taught.

When I got repeated requests from students to learn how to memorize and perform biblical passages, I decided to offer a course on it. The course has been offered as a semester-long course in three hour blocks of time one evening each week. I can take only twelve students in the class, because I can not direct/ coach more than that number in a group and because we would not otherwise have enough time for all to share their stories each week. I have now taught the class five times. Here is the course description.

Scripture by Heart. *The purpose of this course is to train parish leaders in the memorization and presentation of biblical stories for congregational life. A major focus is on the life-changing power of stories. Students have opportunities to practice performing biblical selections in class and in public presentations. They also learn how to incorporate biblical storytelling into preaching, worship, Bible study, and pastoral care.*

The following components are part of the class: reading books, studying passages, memorizing, performing, creative retelling, discussion, and lecture presentations by me and the students. There is no written work for this class. Students are to prepare oral performances of biblical passages, explanations of readings, and discussions of the readings. Students prepare performance pieces for each class. At mid-term, the class prepares selections from Scripture to be performed publically by the group for the larger seminary community. The course culminates in a second public storytelling concert for the LSTC community. Most pieces in these public presentations are one-person performances. A few are presented by two students as dramatic dialogues. I emphasize for students to do word-for-word memorization, because I think that being precise is crucial for interpretation. Also, if these future pastors end up performing these stories as the scripture lessons in worship, they need to get it right.

I call the course “Scripture by Heart,” because I am trying to get away from the old experience of rote memorization. This does not mean that I do not expect students to aim to learn the stories as they appear in the text of Scripture, but because I want them to learn passages so well that they come from the heart—like songs or hymns they know well, or poetry they could recite easily or stories they have never forgotten. We all know some songs so well we can sing them without thinking. But when we then *do* think about them as we sing them, we make the words of the composer and of the singer into *our* words, and it is *we* who are now expressing the thoughts and feelings and commitments manifest in the lyrics and the melody of the song. If we could learn passages of the Bible so well that they become “ours” in some sense, then it would be *scripture from the heart*.

In our culture, the heart is the seat of the emotions. In the Bible, the bowels are the seat of emotions, and the heart is the center of thinking and willing. I want students to experience a story with heart, mind, and will—the emotions of the story and the potential change in thinking that may result, as well as the ethical shifts in behavior called forth by any given story. All these dynamics are crucial, because stories do not affect just our emotions; they also change our thinking, our will, our imagination, and our actions. Besides, in biblical anthropology, the heart

and the mouth are closely tied up together: “Out of the mouth the heart speaks.” So the issue is not just memorizing and telling, but taking it in, being changed by it, and sharing it with others.

Also, in the cultures of the time of the Bible, there was little introspection. They were oral cultures; people had open lives and very little privacy, hence little solitude. The interior life was considered to be a mystery. The mysteries of a person lay in the heart, and only God knows what is in the heart. The point here is that words and stories change people at the heart level or, as we might say today, at a subconscious as well as a conscious level. A seed is sown, and the earth brings forth fruit on its own. By means of stories, therefore, God gives us a new heart—a new way of thinking, a new will, and new emotions to empower us to act. The idea is to put God’s word within us. So the class is not a mechanical telling of the stories; and it includes opportunities for students to share what was happening to them in the course of learning and telling the biblical stories.

I tell students that it is not permitted to turn in written work for the class! For students, this is unheard of. It changes the entire way the students relate to the learning process. We tend to privilege writing as the end product of thinking and the basis for evaluation. I was trying to counter that by asking students to be prepared to share their reflections about a book they were reading or their insights about their work in an effective oral way with each other. This class involved more than memory work for performances; it included all the oral interactions in the classroom. In addition to a focus on Bible passages, they also performed liturgies and discussed the oral dynamics of preaching. And they learned about how to train lectors in reading Scripture.

Throughout this experience, I wanted the students to reflect on the distinctiveness of a traditional oral culture. The biblical times were predominantly oral cultures in which 95% or more of the population were non-literate. All the writings now collected in the Bible were originally performed and received by audiences in an oral venue. To give that ethos some contemporary connections, we read Tex Sample’s little book on a rural setting, *Ministry in an Oral Culture*. He draws on Walter Ong’s work on oral cultures, *Orality and Literacy*, to show how the ethos of an oral culture differs from that of a print culture. Here are some features of oral cultures relevant to the learning context in our classroom:

- Teach/ learn by apprenticeship
- Express an empathetic core, both for the characters in a story and for others in the class.
- Communal ethics. How will people in the class be affected by what we do and ask people to do?
- Do lots of storytelling
- Learn/create some proverbs to help us learn.

I sought to be intentional and explicit about our efforts to adopt these approaches. Even though it was quite artificial and the students were “reading about” it, nevertheless, such a non-traditional educational approach got them thinking about the contrast between oral-oriented cultures and print-oriented cultures. Some African-American students, Native American students, some international students, and some students with rural backgrounds—who had lived closer than others to the ethos of an oral culture—resonated especially well with the experience.

Also, you will notice from the course description that we spent a good bit of time talking about the power of stories. We read Tom Boomershine’s book, *Story Journey*, which shows a number of ways you can learn and teach Bible stories, how the experience of performance can help to interpret the stories, and how stories can be used in various venues of Christian

ministry. Out of this, I asked students together to list all the different ways stories might be important for the ministry of clergy and laity in a congregation. I have been impressed with their imaginative suggestions. In addition to the importance of stories in preaching, education, hospital care, and pastoral care, they suggested that different families could learn different stories and share them in a storytelling event, that a church could adopt a story related to its own identity and everyone could learn it, that members could set up a chain ministry to call the next person and tell them a story, that children could learn stories and tell them together or act them out in worship, among other ideas. I introduced them to the “Network of Biblical Storytellers” (www.nobs.org), an organization devoted to small group ministry in congregations in which Bible study groups learn a story each month, share it with others, and report back their experiences.

More than this, we talked about the power of stories to transform lives and communities and cultures. Stories are integral to what it means to be human. I was eager to counter the view that stories are a delightful add-on to life, an illustration for a point, a source of entertainment, or a way to enliven a sermon or discussion. Those approaches diminish the power of stories in an incredibly reductionist way. The American novelist Reynolds Price has said that “Next to food and shelter, stories are necessary for human life.” Life itself has a narrative quality. Storying is how we make sense of our lives, our daily activities, the span of our life and its meaning. It is the only way we talk about anything. In this sense, narrative is constitutive of sanity. Furthermore, we swim in the larger stories of our culture that we seek to live out or perhaps to swim against. I wanted students to think of stories in the most profound and powerful way. I wanted us together to ask what stories we live by personally and collectively and how we might change those stories.

I stressed that each of us is in the middle of a story or of multiple stories that make sense of our lives. Usually, we live so as to make our story come out as we might hope. Often, we say we believe we are living one story, say a Christian story about losing our life for others, when in actuality we are living the American dream by securing financial our lives financially and socially. It is a source of courage to examine the stories we claim for ourselves and the personal and social stories we may be caught up in. However, unless we are aware of the stories they are living, it is unlikely that we will be open to changing our stories.

How could I lead students to examine their stories? Together I asked them to reflect on some questions: What has been your story up to this point in life? How would you like it to turn out? If someone were to write a story about you, how might they describe the story of your life? Whose lives do you seek to emulate? How are you trying to live out their stories in your life? What stories have you tried to live that did not work? When have you changed your story? How did that happen? How might you need to change your story now? It is not easy in a class to get to these profound reflections. It takes a measure of self-examination and a lot of trust. It helped that we read Robert Coles’ *The Call of Stories* as a means to see how that might happen. This is a collection of many conversational transcripts of Coles with his students and clients as they were examining their personal stories and changing their personal stories—as they read short stories and novels that transformed their lives. By seeing their own lives mirrored in these published stories and by their identification with various characters, the people in Coles’ book were discovering new ways to think of themselves and the courage to behave in new ways. As we in the class read stories about other people changing, we reflected on the possibilities of transformation in our own lives. Then we would also reflect on the

biblical stories we were memorizing and telling—stories we were seeking to make part of our lives—and we would ask how these stories might change us.

As the class was having these discussions, we were also doing the weekly performing of biblical stories. And this was the most challenging part as teacher. Here again, a crucial ingredient was an atmosphere of trust. How could I establish trust for this process? First, I taught the course pass-fail. As such, the course was not graded in the traditional way. The main expectation was that the student should make a significant effort to participate in all the activities of the class. This approach removed the anxiety about grades. Besides, the cooperative nature of the class in giving each other feedback and in planning the mid-term and final presentations together was intrinsic motivation to do well. Add to this the motivation to perform well before one's classmates and before the larger seminary community. There was certainly incentive enough built into the class to elicit excellent work! Having removed the grade, I as a teacher and the fellow students could work together to the benefit of all in an atmosphere of mutual trust. They looked for my guidance as a coach for their presentations.

Also, I sought to engender trust by the choice of the place where we met. It had to be a place of privacy (no windows into the classroom where others could observe), a quiet place where there was no outside noise and where there would be no interruptions. I created two areas in a large room. One side was a set of tables in a circle where we would share and discuss. With only twelve people around tables in an octagonal shape, we could have a sense of intimacy and closeness. The other part of the room was set up for performance with chairs in one semicircle and a space in front with a small lectern to the side. I always tell them, "Perform as if you had no manuscript, but always keep one nearby to consult if you need it." Hence I place a lectern to the side where they can place the script. "You do not need to perform 'freefall' without a text. Always work with a safety net. It is not a problem to consult a text and then continue." All this is meant to provide a safe place to practice performing.

In addition, as a means to engender trust, I needed to give the students some time on the first class to get to know each other. I asked them to introduce themselves in turn, explain some personal information they might like to share about themselves, what program they were in, why they chose to take the class, and any experience of memorizing and performing (good, bad, or indifferent) they might like to share. After each person spoke, I gave the class an opportunity to ask them questions about what they had said. I made sure everyone knew everyone else's name. I asked them to address each other by name and if they had forgotten the name, simply to ask. I gave them a chance to talk in pairs or small groups on the first day. This group would spend about 40 hours together in the next few months. They would be presenting Bible stories to each other. They would be sharing themselves. They would be giving each other feedback. They would be working together to make presentations. It was important that they begin to know each other from the first day.

Furthermore, I felt like I needed to invite them into the experience. People clearly took this class knowing that they would need to memorize and perform in front of people. Nevertheless, I realized that there was going to be reluctance. So I wanted to confirm their willingness to do this. I told them the story of the massage therapist I had met a few years before: "He is a deep muscle specialist who understands that the mind is not just in the brain and that deep hurts can lodge in different places throughout the body. When I heard him talk, he was in his fifties and clearly open to learning. He began his talk by saying tongue-in-cheek, 'Twenty years ago I knew much more about healing massage than I do now. I used to know just where the hurts were and just what I needed to do to dig in and address them.' 'However,'

he added seriously, ‘I realize that I was often doing more harm than good by kneading into the body where I was not wanted. Now,’ he said, ‘I go very carefully and I wait for the body to teach me where to go and I enter only where the body has invited me to do deep massage. In this cooperative relationship with the body, I am able to be much more effective.’”

After sharing this story, I acknowledge their potential hurts from previous educational experiences, some of which they may have shared with the class in the introductions. I give them a description of the class and how we will proceed. And then I ask their permission: “Will you give me permission to ask you to perform before each other and the seminary community? Will you give me and others permission to give constructive feedback to your performances throughout the class?” And I ask them to say, “Yes” in response to the question. I have never had anyone say that they would not give permission, but I am prepared to try to address that—with more information, some educational therapy, or even a release from the class with my blessing. For those who could name their hurts, I asked them to pray for the healing of memories before the next class.

As a means to relieve anxiety about the class, I also begin by demystifying the process of memory work. They choose a story in one of the gospels for me to memorize right there before them—a story which I have not already learned. They can see that I go line by line repeating to learn it, that I struggle to remember, that I do have a process, and that I need to work at it. I give a handout with a set of suggestions for memorizing: practice the memory work by recounting quickly, get the words off the page and into the realm of sound, imagine the scene fully before you so you can recount what you are seeing in your mind’s eye, and then concentrate on how you will present it (See addendum to this chapter). I then encourage each student to find their own best way to do it.

In this first experience watching me, they invariably say, “I can do that” They correct me when I make mistakes and they want quickly to try it for themselves. They find their own way. Later in the course, I ask them to describe for the benefit of other class members how they go about memorizing and preparing to perform: some use a tape recorder; some learn it generally and then go back and get the details down; others have to “see” it first, and some use key words to help with the recall. I also supply them with a process for interpreting a narrative, so that they will better understand the passage they are learning—the role of the narrator, the plot, characters, settings, rhetorical devices, norms of judgment, and so on. They learn how to stumble in performing. When they perform and forget, we simply wait for them to recover on their own without prompting them. Recovery from forgetting, when it occurs, becomes a normal part of the presentation.

Then for each of the next several weeks I will assign each student a different passage to learn and present, usually from the Gospel of Luke. The first week, they will choose from a list of parables from Luke. The next week we do healing stories, and then controversy stories the following week. Then sequential portions of the Lukan birth narrative. Each week, they sign up for passages they want to do for the following week. In the first week in which they present, I leave time after each presentation for other students to jot down one thing they liked and thought was effective. It is amazing how they learn from watching each other and getting feedback. In the second week, they jot down one positive comment and one suggestion to make it more effective. By the third week, they write down their feedback—then we distribute the evaluation so that each person can see all the comments and suggestions for her or his performance. This process fosters great solidarity among the class and develops relationships of

support and encouragement. Then they prepare together their longer pieces for the mid-term presentation to the community and eventually the same for the end-of-term presentation.

The whole class process is a matter of weaning students through practice and feedback, practice and feedback, so that ultimately they will become able to memorize and perform well independently of the constructive suggestions offered by me and the other students.

My goal for them is that they can present the passages in a *natural* and a *meaningful* way. They will find their own style in doing this. At the same time, they learn techniques drawn from the contemporary art of oral interpretation of literature. We use a text to help with this by Ronald Pelias, called *Performance Studies*. I encourage students to see whatever episode they are recounting in their mind's eye and to show the audience what they are seeing. To do this, they need to develop onstage/offstage focus, how to get different voices for different characters, use gestures in suggestive and natural ways, and make use of pace and inflection, pauses and emphases. I teach them to look to the words of the story itself to guide the choices about these matters. Each session I am working with members to give feedback, to affirm their efforts, and to suggest alternative ways to perform. It is often necessary for students at first to practice performing in somewhat exaggerated ways so as to stretch and expand the range of what seems natural to them.

In this process, I relate to the students as I do in no other class—as director and coach. In other classes, the students are mainly doing work for me and for other students. In this class, I coach the students, working with one individual after another before the group in such a way that all the students can apply to their own performing the suggestions made for each student. I tell them to try it this way or that. I seek to help them get in deeper touch with the stories. I demonstrate for them how they might try to convey the meaning. I ask them what impact they want their passage to have. Even though I am evaluating their work constantly (in terms of effectiveness, not grades), my relationship to them is different than it is in other pedagogical contexts. They are preparing for public presentations, and I am a guide helping them to do it well. We are in this together.

As I said, the outcome is comprised of two storytelling concerts for the community as their midterm and final. We set up the lounge or chapel for these presentations. Usually thirty to fifty people come, mostly families and friends. The students give performances of passages that range in time from five to nine minutes. That is quite a challenge. The students each choose their own passage to present from the Old or New Testament. They are surprised that they have learned to memorize and perform such substantive portions of scripture in such a short period of time.

Here is an example of a program for a mid-term storytelling concert.

- The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42)
- Jesus' Teaching (Luke 6:27-36) and Story
- Romans 5 through 8 (Abbreviated)
- The Story of Jonah
- Jesus' Words to His Disciples (John 14:1-15:17)
- A Story, and Jesus' Teaching (Matthew 25:35-46)
- Rahab's Story (Joshua 2 and James 2:14-26)
- 1 Thessalonians (Abbreviated)
- Anna the Prophetess (A First Person Account)
- Jacob's Story (Genesis 27)
- 2 Samuel 20 and Reflections on Wisdom

Here is an example program of an end-of-term set of presentations.

The Story of Rahab (Joshua)
The Presence of God (Psalm 139)
“How Beautiful You Are” (Song of Solomon 4)
Dry Bones Rising (Ezekiel 37: 1-14)
John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25)
Mary and the Birth of Jesus (Luke 1:39-57; 2:1-7)
Healing Stories (Luke 8:40-56)
Stories about Jesus (Luke 10: 25-42)
Wealth and Poverty in the Kingdom of God (Gospel Stories)
The Bread of Life (John 6)
Washing the Feet (John 13:1-30)
The Raising of Lazarus (John 11)
Resurrections Stories (John 21)

After each concert, the members of the class reflect together on why each chose the passage they presented. This is always illuminating. I recall one person who chose Jonah because it expressed their vocational struggle, another chose the call of Moses because of their lack of self-confidence, another did the “light of the world” passage in John because they suffer from seasonal affective disorder, and another did a passage from Romans to overcome the experience of having had this passage “shoved down his throat” in his youth, and so on.

For most students in this class, what they learned had a high impact on their ministries. There is a new appreciation for the possibilities of scripture reading in worship. After graduating, many of them prepare to preach by memorizing the passage at the beginning of the week and repeating it throughout the week. By Sunday, they know it well enough to present it by heart for the congregation. That way, the “reading” of scripture becomes a high moment in the worship service. Those preparing to preach also report that their sermons seem to emerge organically out of their intimate knowledge of the passage and from the fact that they are living with the passage throughout the week in interaction with their daily lives. Students in the class also learn a portion of the liturgy by heart so that they can transfer what they have learned about Scripture to the way they may conduct the liturgy in worship.

Some time back, I sent a set of questions to the alumni of one of the classes, after they had been in ministry for several years. Here are some direct quotes of the responses I received organized by subject.

The Class

- Students felt comfortable enough to take some risks and really explore the range of what they could do with voice and gesture and still make the telling respectful and authentic. The class didn’t just teach me to tell Bible stories; it also taught me how to teach!
- As a result of this course, a classmate and I offered a practicum for other students who wanted to learn the art of telling Scripture by Heart.
- After both [public performance] occasions the feedback from the seminary community by those who had attended was tremendously positive. For weeks afterward people would approach us and tell us how meaningful it had been for them to hear the stories presented orally and how it had transformed their own relationship with scripture and been deeply moving.

- I recall learning a lot about the art and skill of presentation. In developing a presentation, we are interpreting the scriptures. Body language, movement, facial expression, gesture, tone, inflection etc are all a part of that interpretation. These things have given me great comfort and confidence in presenting the gospel or preaching text each Sunday as well as attempting dramatic presentations with costumes to fit.
- Teaching a clear methodically way of memorization enabled me to participate without a lot of anxiety. Never before had I learned a technique for memorizing.
- This class was like none other that I took at LSTC. I remember being in a small group of people who became friends through a unique experience of sharing of ourselves and sharing Scripture with one another. We grew closer to each other because we were doing something that was not only risky (to tell entire passages of Scripture by heart!) but something that was, in a way, deeply personal (by way of which passages we chose for the mid-term and final).
- Hearing my class mates perform, learning their insights and sharing were wonderful ways of unpacking the scripture and I often felt covered with God's grace in response.
- It was amazing to see how classmates who seemed quiet and timid in other classes appeared more vibrant, excited, vulnerable and genuine in this class. As a result stronger relationships between classmates seemed to be formed in this class.

Relating to Scripture

- What amazed me was the discovery of how much impact the process of learning and telling the stories would have on me. I found myself experiencing the passages from new angles—through the eyes of different characters—and focusing more on the story world—what it might have smelled, felt, sounded and tasted like to the people in it. It is an amazing thing when scripture gets into your heart and very being.
- It had a profound effect. In some ways for the very first time, scripture became me or should I say, "I became scripture." I ate the scripture and digested it. It became a part of me. This has truly been a wonderful gift.
- I was immersed in Scripture, really, for the first time, having to know every jot and tittle (so to speak!) of the passages I was performing. It caused me to ask questions of the text, learn more about the text and its characters and themes, in order to present it faithfully to the audience, being inclusive of mood, different characters, and the overall message of the text.

Personal

- It was, in many ways, a spiritual dawning as I discovered the passion I have for the Story.
- This class has formed and shaped me as a child of God and as a pastor equal to or more than any other class. So often I heard classmates say something like, "Theology is great but I long for more spiritual formation." This class certainly involves theological thought. But more than any other class, it involves spiritual formation.
- This class helped re-connected me spiritually and satisfied my longing to be back in a personal relationship with our Lord. It helped me not lose my sense of vocation in the busy-ness of graduate work. It is the class that I probably remember the most keenly because of its powerful impact on my life at that time.

Worship and Preaching:

- I was very eager to try it in a parish setting. It was overwhelmingly received in an affirmative manner. I have loved this process of Scripture by Heart and have continued with it in my ministry of four years.
- Amazingly, the weeks I took the time to first learn the text—deeply learn it so that I breathed it—the sermon would come on its own. To this day, when I find myself feeling “stuck” and the creative well is running dry, I will stop and learn the story; and when I do, the rest comes.
- My hope is to expose as many people as possible to scripture in this way. I am gratified to see how people light up when they discover, or re-discover, scripture this way.
- I have continued with presenting scripture by heart each Sunday for four years now. I continue to hear things like, “I heard the Word differently” or “I hear the gospel of Christ much better” or “It becomes so much more real.” I have even had congregants invite others to worship just to hear the scriptures presented by memory.
- Memorizing Scripture helped me preach better, in the sense that I had developed a practice of asking deeper questions of the text, and, by telling the Gospel by heart, the story came alive to the congregation.

Addendum: Guidelines to Learning a Story

Step One: Memorize.

A. In pairs do the following exercise:

1. Read the passage silently and study it. Then have one person tell the story as closely as possible to the wording, while the other person listens without following the book. Then look and see what you missed.
2. Repeat the above, but reversing roles.
3. Ask questions line by line without answering them.

B. Tell the story from the point of view of each character by changing the relevant pronouns. Invest yourself in the feelings and tone of each character.

C. Follow the story, line by line, for causation and connection. Ask how and why each line follows the previous one.

D. Now learn each line one after the other by repeating them—first one without looking, then the next with the first, and so on. Repeat it until you know it by heart, then keep finding occasions to repeat it. To practice memory work, repeat quickly.

Step Two: visualize.

A. Imagine you were responsible for the setting of a film on this story. What would you have to know to do it? Describe the outcome.

B. Imagine the whole set-up of the story in scenes units. Place people where they will be in the scene. Place yourself. Now tell the story as you imagine it.

Step three: Tell it.

A. Practice telling it. How will you stand? What will your gestures be? How will you inflect the dialogue of the different characters? Where and how will you place the emphasis? How will you pace the story?

B. Now (“forgetting” everything you just learned!) imagine you were there when the scene actually occurred.

1. Tell it to a friend in a natural way appropriate to the nature of the story. Do this with someone outside a “performance” setting.

2. Now do it with the group as you did it with the friend, as if you were addressing just one or two persons. Be a storyteller, not an actor.