

**Amanda Pittman**  
**Duke University Divinity School**  
[amanda.pittman@duke.edu](mailto:amanda.pittman@duke.edu)  
**REA Annual Meeting, November 7-9, 2014**

**Stories of Faith in the Unmaking of Violence:  
Religious Narratives and Violent Cultural Stories**

**Abstract:** In this paper, I want to explore what a particular biblical story might suggest regarding the capacity of stories of faith to counter cultural stories of redemptive violence. The Acts of the Apostles, a richly descriptive and often deeply inter-textual narrative, describes the common life and mission of the early church. The shipwreck scene in Acts 27 is in ways deeply reminiscent of Greco-Roman novels, drawing on many of the same literary tropes, yet the violent possibilities realized in other narratives are foreclosed. Drawing on this text, and in conversation with literature on the formative capacities of narrative and practices, I will suggest that stories of faith and practices of hope provide necessary resources for Christian communities to resist the myth of redemptive violence.

**Introduction: The Power of Narrative in Christian Life**

Aside from the normalization, if not glorification, of violence in popular media, certain kinds of violent stories appear with haunting regularity in our news cycles: murder and kidnappings at the hands of extremists, assault weapons in neighborhoods and the loss of innocent life, domestic violence, sexual violence on college campuses, and so forth. Given the prominence, if not inescapability, of these stories, especially once coupled with violence as entertainment, religious education faces a significant challenge. What resources might our faith traditions provide to help people of faith gain the capacity to imagine different outcomes, to resist perpetuating cyclical stories of violence, and to facilitate the un-making of violence?

I suggest that religious narratives are a central resource and begin by identifying three arenas of narrative's formative capacities for the self that emerge from a diverse body of literature. Second, I employ the shipwreck of apostle Paul in the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts of the Apostles as a lens through which to consider the potential of religious characters formed by religious narratives to act within typically violent cultural stories. In the third section, drawing on the insights of the prior sections, I suggest three ways that educators might consider religious narratives as counter-formation in the face of cultural narratives of apparently inevitable, clearly, glorified, or redemptively portrayed violence.

**Tracing the Formative Potential of Narratives**

Based on readings from a variety of fields, I posit three distinct, if only heuristic, categories for describing narrative's ostensible functions in the formation of human identity and meaning.<sup>1</sup> I further suggest that viewing the potential of narrative through these three lenses may help Christian educators consider the distinctive ways in which religious narratives are important for communities of faith committed to the un-making of violence.

The first category entails narrative's capacities to shape human meaning in ways that run below conscious awareness and at the level of the emotions and the body. This is crucial because

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<sup>1</sup> I am influenced here by Richard Bondi, "The Elements of Character" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12 (1984): 201-218.

emotions, Mark Johnson claims, “lie at the heart of our ability to appraise the situations we find ourselves in and act appropriately. When we feel them, they can enter into our more conscious deliberations about how we should respond to our situation.”<sup>2</sup> Simply stated, no perception on the basis of which to make meaning exists without emotion. Thus Johnson calls for a reclamation of the body’s centrality to meaning; the body through its visceral comportment in the world powerfully influences the meaning produced by our more strictly rational faculties.

It is primarily narrative, according to Christian philosopher and educator James A.K. Smith, that functions at the level Johnson describes. Central stories and narratives shape the way we imagine the world before we rationalize about it – helping to comprise our “social imaginary”, to use (as does Smith) Charles Taylor’s helpful terminology. Such central stories, says Smith, “capture and orient . . . not primarily didactically or instructively, but affectively and unconsciously: such stories are ‘understood’ by the imagination at a ‘gut level’ that turns out to be the incarnate core of my existence.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, at the root of our affective and imaginative engagement with the world are certain stories that shape our perception of that world, and these stories emerge from and affect us through our bodily participation in cultures and communities.

While Johnson and Smith locate narrative’s function at the pre-conscious level of the body and affections, other scholars in the second category focus more on the explicit consideration and appropriation of narrative toward the end of the construction of identity and moral character. White and Epton, pioneers of “narrative therapy,” refer to the process by which meaning is inscribed on human experience as “storying,” a process in which people gain “a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives [that] is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences.”<sup>4</sup> Goodson and Gill, drawing on what they deem an a emerging consensus about the meaningfulness of life being essentially narrative in character, go so far as to define learning as “an interplay of to-and-fro dialogic encounters at the core of which is enhanced understanding of oneself, others, one’s place in the world and a course of action more aligned with one’s values, beliefs, and worldviews.”<sup>5</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas and Alisdair MacIntyre share these concerns about the individual’s relationship to meaning-full narratives, but attend more specifically to the communities and traditions that ultimately provide the contours for an individual’s moral formation. Hauerwas, for instance, claims only “by learning to make our lives conform to God’s way, [can] Christians claim that they are provided with a self that is a story.”<sup>6</sup> Though MacIntyre places less emphasis

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 60.

<sup>3</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 127.

<sup>4</sup> Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), 12. In narrative therapy, a therapist supports individuals in the construction of new stories, as individuals recognize the operative stories, externalize the problematic elements, and construct a new sense of identity out of available, typically “unstoried”, experience.

<sup>5</sup> Ivor F. Goodson and Scherto R. Gill, *Narrative Pedagogy: Life History and Learning*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 88. The telling of stories is not transformative in and of itself, but the dialogic “narrative encounter” provides a space for re-narration and renewed forms of action as teacher and learner interact around the life narrative, locate it in terms of broader social forces or particular traditions, and finally integrate the story by reconstructing the narrative. Ibid., 118. Benjamin Spinoza never cites Goodson and Gill but does discuss “narrative pedagogies” along the same lines of individual construction of stories. Benjamin Spinoza, “The Christian Story and Our Stories: Narrative Pedagogy in Congregational Life.” *CEJ* 10 (2013), 432-443.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 142.

on the individual's narrative construction of a sense of self, he does attend to necessity of a narrative for an intelligible account of moral action – thus the oft cited quote, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”<sup>7</sup>

The third category attends more explicitly to the relationship between narratives and embodied practices. As David Hogue notes, “stories are not only to be told and retold, they are also to be lived,” and his interest in the intersection of story and ritual in worship coheres nicely with Smith's, who draws on both Bourdieu and Taylor in insisting that bodily practices are actually *constitutive of* certain understandings of the world, not just responses to them.<sup>8</sup> Smith's insistence on careful attention to practices in learning communities, like the Christian university, derives from this concern for what Hogue calls the “bottom up” formation of the narratives through which the world is understood.<sup>9</sup>

Along similar lines, in expounding on his “social theory of learning,” Etienne Wenger maintains that “what narratives, categories, roles and positions come to mean as an experience of participation is something that must be worked out in practice.”<sup>10</sup> This theory of learning situates it within the multi-directional interaction of community, identity, practice, and meaning. Through participation in communities of practice, individuals are able to “anchor [learning] in practice yet make it broad, creative, and effective in the wider world.”<sup>11</sup> Wenger's approach illustrates the necessity that narratives be “worked out in practice” in order for a robust identity construction by both community and the individual who participates in it.

The preceding paragraphs have briefly surveyed three ways in which narrative is said to effect the formation of identity: 1) in the imagination, operating on the body and through the affections; 2) in the formation of a sense of self, including a sense of one's moral agency; and 3) as both producer and product of bodily practices. It is my contention that these three operations of narrative can be fruitfully considered both in relationship to biblical narratives and in relationship to the unmaking of violence. Toward a demonstration of that claim, the next section takes on a particular narrative biblical narrative – the story of Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27 – in order to consider how it might prompt reflection on the capacity of Christian narratives to form agents capable of countering commonly violent endings to cultural stories.

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<sup>7</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3d. ed.; Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 219.

<sup>8</sup> David A. Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 111. These understandings may be unarticulated and un-articulate, thus Bourdieu states, “What is ‘learned by body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 73; see also *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> See also David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith, “Introduction: Practices, Faith, and Pedagogy” in *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1-23.

<sup>10</sup> Wenger's “social theory of learning” is an integration of theories of practice and theories of identity. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 151.

<sup>11</sup> Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 217. In an earlier publication with Jean Lave, Wenger argues that “the practice of the community creates the potential ‘curriculum’ in the broadest sense – that which may be learned by newcomers with legitimate peripheral access . . . a learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement.” Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93.

## The Formative Capacities of Narrative and Acts of the Apostles

Commentators on Acts generally assume some level of formational function, a fact which suggests that the intersection between the formative capacities of narrative and this particular biblical narrative may be both evocative and fruitful. In telling the story of God's work among the early Christian community, the writer of Acts frequently draws upon other stories known to the text's implied readers. Specific texts along with general tropes and themes from the Hebrew Bible, from Luke's gospel, and even popular Greco-Roman literature appear interwoven in this often deeply allusive text. More pointedly, the stories in Acts occasionally subvert dominant cultural stories or values, leading Kavin Rowe to argue that the early Christians presented a challenge to the dominant ethos of the empire at the level of the "social imaginary."

These dynamics can be developed in many and various profitable directions, but here I am especially interested in two questions. First, how might the story of Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27, a story that appropriates a common literary form and fascination with travel, constitute a re-narration of an anticipated violent ending? Second, can the broader dynamics of this story, understood in terms of the heuristic categories introduced in the prior section, suggest ways that religious educators could conceive of the power of narrative to contest cultural stories of glorified or redemptive violence?

Commentators have established that Acts 27 bears no little resemblance in its dynamics and motifs to sea travel and shipwreck scenes in Greco-Roman novels.<sup>12</sup> The story of Leucippe and Clitophon, a novel from the same general period, demonstrates many of these similarities, like a divinely secured happy ending for the story's heroes.<sup>13</sup> In this Greco-Roman novel, as the ship breaks apart and people begin to perish at the hands of the raging seas, chaos and mob violence ensue during a desperate battle for the few remaining spots on a life boat. At the conclusion of the scene, the few lucky survivors, like the story's protagonist lovers, float to shore. Yet Acts 27 concludes with the simple declaration: "And so it was that all were brought safely to land (Acts 27:44)," suggesting a very different course of events. The reader of Acts 27 finds Paul, the central missionary figure of the second half of the book, bound for trial in Rome as an unjustly imprisoned man. Accompanied by a few other disciples, including apparently the narrator, Paul's faithful presence and actions secure an alternative ending to a dramatic course of events, which may be summarized as follows:

The pilots of Paul's ship, having convinced the Roman guards of their plan, set sail from Crete to Rome despite it being well past the safe time to sail. Paul enters the scene first here, with a prescient – and ignored - warning that their late departure may result in the loss of cargo, ship, and even their lives. Almost immediately, a great storm arises and drives the ship dangerously off course. Says the narrator: "We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned" (27:18-20).

At this dark juncture, Paul speaks again, urging his fellow passengers to have courage because the Lord has told him that all lives would be preserved, though the ship may be lost. On

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<sup>12</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>13</sup> Marguerat identifies this story as an exemplar of the genre, but cautions that it cannot be assumed that Luke's imagined reader knows this specific story. However, given the frequent presence of shipwrecks as a literary trope, comparing Acts 27 with this particular story is still illustrative of important dynamics. Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 250. The full text of the novel is available here: <https://archive.org/details/achillestadiuswi00achiuoft>

the fourteenth night of peril at sea, with the new realization that the ship was at greater risk of running aground, a group of sailors apparently unconvinced by Paul's confident declaration of their salvation, attempt to escape ship by disembarking in a lifeboat under the pretense of putting out additional anchors. Here Paul speaks again, telling his Roman guards that the assurance of their salvation depends upon the salvation of all people on board, saying "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved" (27:31). At his second proclamation, the soldiers cut away the ropes and the passengers' common lot is secured. That same night, Paul speaks a final time, encouraging his fellow passengers to eat since they will survive. Paul then takes bread, thanks God, breaks it, and partakes of it in the presence of the other passengers. Then, and only then, do the fellow passengers "take courage" as Paul has advised for days, eating and then throwing the remaining grain over board.

In the final scene, as the boat begins to break up, the soldiers decide to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. The centurion, however, wanting to save Paul, prohibits them from doing so. Instead, the 276 passengers floated to land on various bits of wreckage. "And so it was that all were brought safely to shore (Acts 27:44)."

We may note at least three moments in which the readers' expectation of a violent scene is thwarted, especially in comparison to *Leucippe and Clitophon*. First, at Paul's words the lifeboat is cut away, foreclosing the possibility of a violent rush for self-preservation, like the scene from *Leucippe and Clitophon*. The basis of Paul's action to prevent this potentially violent attempt is the conviction that the fates of the 276 passengers are bound together. Second, the centurion prevents the summary execution of the prisoners out of respect for Paul, which has apparently increased through the ordeal.<sup>14</sup> Third, and as a broad basis for the first two, Paul remains confident of and testifies to the Lord's deliverance of the group from a violent death at the mercy of a violent sea. In the end, Paul's hopeful public action of breaking bread conveys his confidence more effectively than his words. With these outcomes and actions of the text in mind, what implications can be gathered for communities of faith in violent times?

### **Un-making Violence through Narrative**

In light of the functions of narratives described above, and in conversation with Acts 27, I conclude by suggesting three ways that educators might think about the capacity of religious narratives to counter cultural narratives of glorified or redemptive violence.<sup>15</sup> First, engaging religious narratives can help individuals and communities imagine alternate endings to violent stories in our context. Second, engaging in religious narratives can assist in the formation of faithful, hopeful characters capable of identifying themselves as actors in a kind of story that rejects glorified violence as a plot device. Third, the performance of religious narratives in the context of a practicing community involves bodies in actions that enact and sustain hopeful, non-violent stories.

First, engaging religious narratives may help us imagine alternate endings and unexpected ways of responding to situations of violence. In Acts 27, hope and hopelessness are

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<sup>14</sup> Though a prisoner, Paul has been granted certain privileges like having his friends care for his needs (Acts 27:3) and gains enough respect for his word to be heeded later in the story as it was not in the beginning.

<sup>15</sup> Two important caveats are in order. First, though I am working with Christian narratives and from a Christian standpoint, I anticipate that other religious traditions and communities will find their own narratives and resources with which to work. Second, I acknowledge that not all religious narratives resist violence, and some appear to glorify it. While I do not mean to gloss over the hermeneutical complexity that this raises, the normative function of the story of Christ provides what I see as the central point of resistance to interpretations of Christian texts that glorify or promote violence.

the affections most prominently at play, the actualization of both dependent on the characters' imaginations of the outcome of the storm. Paul's confidence of their delivery rests on a vision from the Lord, yet the engaged reader is aware that this particular story partakes in broader themes from Acts as a whole. For a church that faced the threat of cultural and physical violence from quite different opposing forces, the capacity to boldly carry on the work of the kingdom depended upon the ability to imagine divinely secured outcomes that appear to defy expectations and circumstances. No story more directly encapsulates that sustaining hope than that of Christ, who suffered and did not perpetrate violence, and in whose life acts of human violence were ultimately thwarted by resurrection, the promise of which sustains the community's life. Thus a level of eschatological hope in the accomplishment of God's good purposes provides the imaginative framework for constructing meaning in the present circumstance.

Yet God's good purposes in Acts are accomplished through cooperative human agents, faithful characters who participate in a certain kind of story and whose own character development takes Christ as model. In his final journey and trial, Paul is characterized through narrative links to the story and character of Jesus, and in a broad sense the text of Acts itself conducts an explicit appropriation of scriptural and cultural narratives toward the end of character and community formation. As a hopeful character whose faithful presence influences non-Christian others and alters the course of events in a non-violent direction, and as a moral agent whose understands his own actions in terms of the broader narrative in which he sees himself a part, Paul presents an intriguing model for our consideration as educators interested in the formation of those capable of resisting violence.

Third, this story portrays the intersection of practice and narrative when it records Paul's engagement in the practice of breaking bread. This ordinary, and here somewhat pragmatic practice given the necessity of physical strength to survive the ordeal, is nonetheless pregnant with meaning as a distinctively Christian practice. Luke narrates Paul's actions with the same sequence of events that characterizes the meal at the feeding of the five thousand (9:16), with the disciples at Emmaus (24:30, and, most critically, at the institution of the Eucharist (Luke 22:19): taking, thanking, breaking, and partaking. Given the presence of the Eucharistic sequence, it seems evident that the reader should see the resonances of these other stories of provision, sacrifice, and resurrection in Paul's actions on a stormy sea. Here it is Paul's practice, not his words, that ultimately proves persuasive.

For religious educators, the following questions seem pressing in light of the violence that faces our communities within and without: What stories of faith can shape imagination in such a way that violent outcomes increasingly seem neither inevitable nor necessary for the accomplishment of desired ends, against what the myth of redemptive and glorified violence persuasively contends? How might religious educators construct learning experiences that invite people into the difficult work of un-masking in order to un-make cultural stories, the interlacing religious narratives with personal and communal stories? Finally, what are the practices in which our communities engage that arise from the community's story of faith while also contributing to the formation of faithful disciples in concrete situations? I have attempted here to consider these questions in terms of a particular biblical narrative, and biblical narratives provide one powerful location for this kind of exploration, but a number of other possibilities exist. Practitioners must consider these questions in light of their particular situation, but the questions bear serious and persistent consideration.

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