

What Our Stories Tell Us

David Turnbull, SA/NT State Director and intercultural studies expert (he has a Doctorate in it!), investigates how the stories of our culture shape us.

Have you ever lived in a place where TV is not available? For the first sixteen years of my life TV was a novelty. Apart from sport, my spare time outside school centred around engaging with stories via books and storytellers. This was especially true during our six years in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. At the kitchen table or in the lounge room we listened to guests share stories of their adventures in remote parts of the country or to my mother relaying stories to us of people she had met or times she had seen God at work. These stories became embedded into our family life.

But speaking more broadly, how do stories shape communities and reflect cultures? I see three main ways.

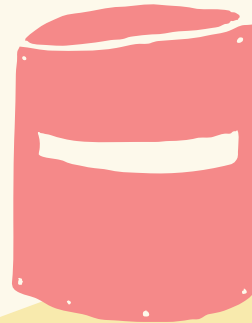
First, stories are a medium in which communities reinforce the core cultural values and principles underpinning them. Stories are a way of consolidating tradition and ensuring the key elements are passed down from one generation to the next. We can see this in the Aboriginal Dreaming accounts which communicate laws, define relationships and explain existence.

Second, the shared stories within a social group or community build unity and shape identity. The role of unity is significant in ensuring the life of the community into the future. These shared stories often feature in rituals and ceremonies. Think of ANZAC day recounts of the Gallipoli story and the way they build our identity around the concept of mateship and being the underdog.

Third, stories can be used to challenge perceptions and cultural practices in a non-confrontational manner and introduce new ideas. Where direct speaking can alienate and build walls, stories can cut through, be heard and transform. Jesus in Palestine provides an excellent model through His use of parables to bring difficult to accept truths to those listening.

Whether in an Australian neighborhood or among a least-reached people group, when engaging with people of other cultural backgrounds, ask yourself three questions:

1. What are stories of my own culture that have shaped me and my values?
2. What are stories of my friend's culture that have shaped them and their values?
3. How do God's stories connect with or contrast to their cultural stories and values?



Thanks David! Ok, let's give it try. To keep it level one, we'll go for an Australian cultural context.

Celebrated Cultural Story: Ned Kelly

Cultural Values Highlighted:

- Anti-authoritarian (somehow he's seen as the underdog)
- Individualism (part of a gang but he's the enduring figure)
- Innovation (that armour!)
- Traditional masculinity (strong, wild and free)
- Male stories (pulling out and seeing Ned in the context of Australia's history of celebrated heroes... where are the females?)

Points of Connection:

- Stories of Jesus challenging the authority of the day (flipping the tables at the temple etc)
- God is our creative creator God who created us to be innovative!

Points of Contrast:

- Jesus honours the authority of God and we are to honour His authority (and the authority of our worldly leaders where this doesn't conflict with Him)
- Godly men are humble, compassionate and servant-hearted
- Jesus elevates women and listens to their stories