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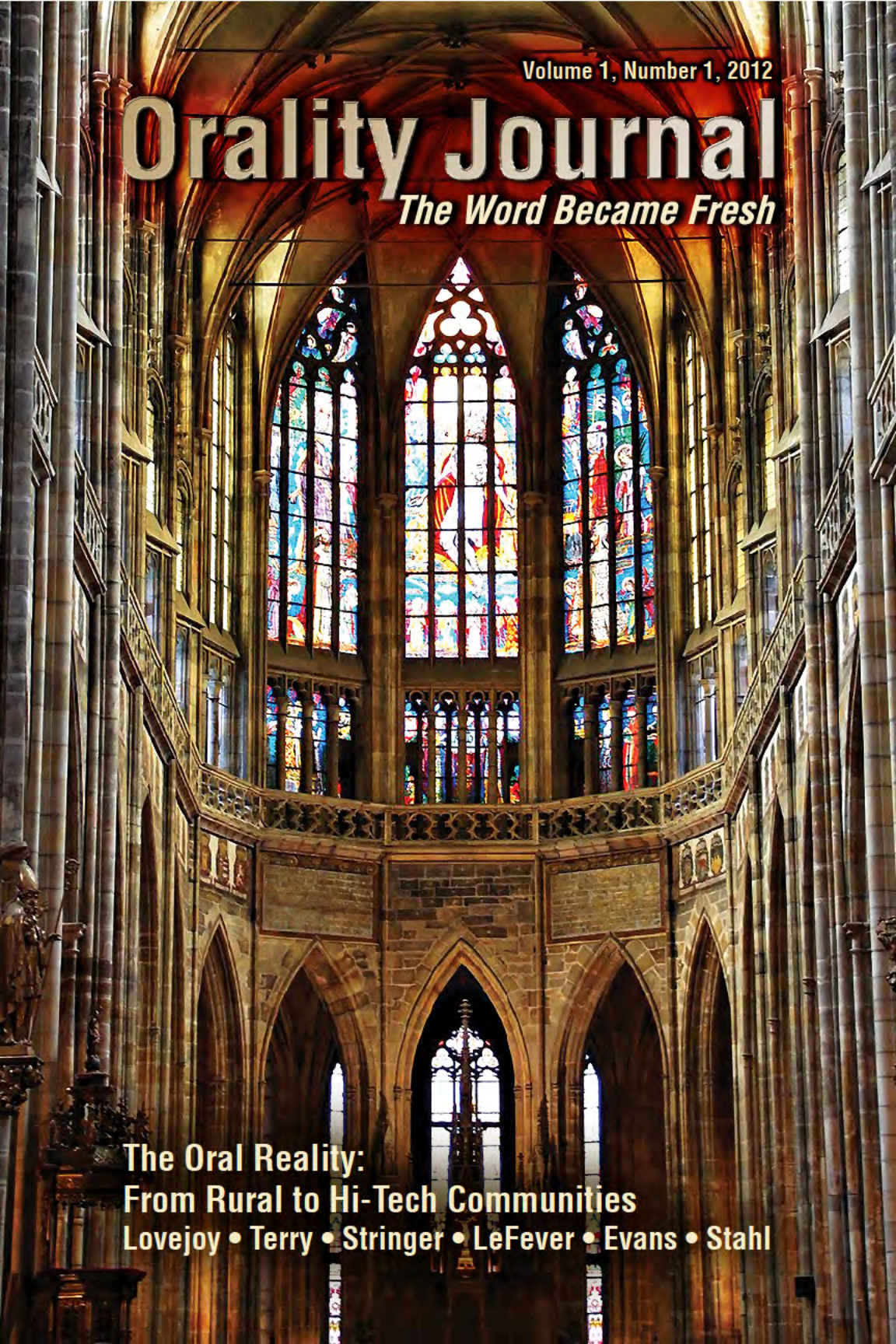
Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh



The Oral Reality: From Rural to Hi-Tech Communities

Lovejoy • Terry • Stringer • LeFever • Evans • Stahl

International
Orality
Network

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Cover Photo

The picture of the most important church in Prague, parts of this castle—building complex started in the tenth century. This church took over six hundred years to complete her construction; her design influenced the architecture of churches across Central Europe and as far as England. She stood during the time when oral culture was thriving; she witnessed the printing age; now, she is gliding into the digital age.

My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.

Psalm 78:1--4 (NIV)

Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

Orality Journal is the journal of the International Orality Network. It is published online semi-annually and aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on the issues of orality, discoveries of innovations in orality, and praxis of effectiveness across multiple domains in society. This online journal is international and interdisciplinary, serving the interests of the orality movement through research articles, documentation, book reviews, and academic news. Occasionally, print editions will be created. Submission of items that could contribute to the furtherance of the orality movement are welcomed.

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Editor's Notes

by Samuel E. Chiang

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Orality Journal.

Irony is not lost that we are moving to include a print mode to express the importance of this multi-discipline and multi-faceted matter of orality. So why another journal, and why now? Let us explore together.

A Gutenberg Parentheses*

Communications from creation to about the time of the Gutenberg Press were primarily oral in nature as writing systems took time to develop and technology for mass printing had not yet arrived. In the fifteenth century the Gutenberg Press allowed printing en mass; this, coupled with the Reformation, where the Church enthusiastically declared that all should be able to read, fueled the trend toward reading, literacy, and privacy. Memory (community and social memory), which was at the core of society, got outsourced to the containers of paper and filing cabinets.

Oral cultures value face-to-face communication, in context, and living within the 'story' of the community. The literate world communicates through textual means and often is not able to convey the whole context in a communiqué. The textual 'story' is truncated or emptied of meaning. As we enter the digital culture, one that is defined by collaborating with multimodal content and tasks, strangely we are on a converging trajectory with the oral culture.

In fact, academicians are labeling the period from the fifteenth to the twentieth century the Gutenberg Parentheses: a period where the left side of the brain took over and gave birth to sciences, inventions, and philosophies, but silenced the right side of the brain from creativity. Proceeding into the twenty-first century, the captured images, reality entertainment, and online video gaming actually mirror closer to the pre-Gutenberg era, where the right side of the brain was much more in concert with the left side. The result is once again a more holistic approach to society and tasks, thereby recapturing creativity, collaboration, and community.

In oral cultures, the information is local and always rooted in context and history, so that there is meaning with coherence to the community. In digital culture, like that of Facebook postings, the emphasis is on morphing the private and individual into open, specific, contextual, and communal experiences, albeit at a distance.

This form of communal experience with a digital identity and digital narrative imbedded into social networking is reinforced by the F-Factor—fans, friends, and followers. So pervasive is this practice that we often discover products and services by relying on our social networks. We are conscious of how our postings will be rated. We are constantly seeking feedback both to improve and validate decisions. Our social networks (communities) are often buying together, and our digital communities are themselves becoming products and services. The F-Factor put in a hard closing parenthesis to the Gutenberg Press, period!

A Rummage Sale

The Church can be described as a large social network and in her book, The Great Emergence, Phyllis Tickle has suggested that it is experiencing what amounts to a large rummage sale, one that happens every five hundred years. In the midst of the convergence of oral, literate, and digital culture, coupled with online digital identity and narrative, and further combined with the phenomena of the Gutenberg Parentheses, what does the Church have to say and how do we move forward in this very fluid state?

During the recent International Orality Network mini-global consultation, "Beyond Western Literate Models: Contextualizing Theological Education in Oral Contexts" (hosted at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College), forty-two academicians and practitioners from eighteen institutions and fourteen organizations indicated (1) an abundance of oral preference learners in the classrooms, (2) the need to embrace orality as a part of the curriculum, and (3) that what is working on the field is now beginning to speak into formal education, offering rippling implications for accreditation. This is a defining moment for us to explore and learn together!

With the hard close of the Gutenberg Parentheses and the onset of the great emergence, we continue with the residual effects of the print-based culture, and we are rediscovering the ancient keys to the oral cultures that are infused with visual digital effects. Thus, we commence this new journey with a journal.

Orality Journal is the journal of the International Orality Network. Since the network is based on the voluntarism of individual and organizational members, this journal is your journal. We plan to publish this journal online, semi-annually. We aim to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on the issues of orality, discoveries of innovations in orality, and praxis of effectiveness across multiple domains in society. This online journal is international and interdisciplinary serving the interests of the orality movement through research articles, documentation, book reviews, and academic news. Similar to this inaugural issue which is printed, from time to time we will also print other editions.

We welcome submission of items that could contribute to the furtherance of the orality movement. In future editions, we will commence other departments, including a section on book reviews and noteworthy articles. We also welcome your comments, questions, and suggestions! Send your feedback to: oralityjournal@gmail.com.

Journeying with you,

Samuel E. Chiang
From Abuja, Nigeria

Endnote

*For a more complete discussion please refer to the chapter *"Three Worlds Converged: Living in an Oral, Literate, and Digital Culture"*, James R. Krabill, gen. ed.; Frank Fortunato, Robin Harris, and Brian Schrag, eds., *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012).

Let's Do the Twist: Learning the Dance of Telling Interesting Bible Stories

by Janet Stahl

Janet Stahl serves as the Orality Coordinator for The Seed Company. She has an MA in Bilingual and Multicultural Education from the SIT in Brattleboro, VT, and has worked with her husband Jim in Vanuatu from 1991-2006. They are working with communities in PNG and Asia to establish Bible storytelling programs.

Recently, a colleague from a partner organization commented that he appreciated how much attention we give in our training of telling 'interesting' stories.

We had just finished leading a two-week workshop for several mother-tongue storytelling teams. During this time, the teams crafted, tested, and worked with a Bible scholar to check the accuracy of their stories. By the end of the workshop, each of the teams had learned to tell four or five Bible stories. They committed to both share these in their communities and train others to tell the stories.

My husband, Jim, and I have developed an approach for training local teams to tell Bible stories in their languages where there are no translated scriptures. We teach several techniques for helping storytellers improve their skills in sharing interesting Bible stories. We organize our workshops into short sessions, during which team members practice telling their own traditional or personal stories to each other. Each member observes how to use body language and voice to add impact to their stories. These lively sessions help

build community as well as give the story-crafters opportunities to practice and improve their skills.

The next part of the process is a group discussion of the main literary aspects of the story. Team members discuss the characters, setting, and plot of the story. The group also identifies the 'twist' of a story—the unexpected event, or the problem or conflict that needs resolution. The twist is the part of the story that makes it interesting. For example, the parable of the Prodigal Son would be far less captivating if the father waited for the son to reach the house and then stood in heavy silence, expecting the son to explain his return. In the Cain and Abel story, people often remark that they are surprised by God's merciful treatment of Cain. Instead of God demanding a life for a life, God punishes Cain and then *protects* his life.

When we discover the twists of the stories in a large group discussion, the results are often excitingly varied. This is because we all experience the stories through our own lenses shaped by our experiences and the cultural norms and values of our communities.

When we discover the twists of the stories in a large group discussion, the results are often excitingly varied. This is because we all experience the stories through our own lenses shaped by our experiences and the cultural norms and values of our communities.

For some groups, the twist in the Matthew nativity story is that Joseph did not take revenge or demand retribution from Mary's family when he learned she was pregnant. For others, the twist is Joseph listening to the angel's message and his willingness to accept the role as guardian/ father to Mary's baby. For still others, the twist is God's intricate plan for his son's birth, which involves sending his angel to each key player in the event.

Once the story-crafters articulate the twist of the story for themselves, we encourage them to practice what they can do with their body language and voice to make the twist come alive. While

practicing the stories, they discover more of the richness of the stories and can recall more details.

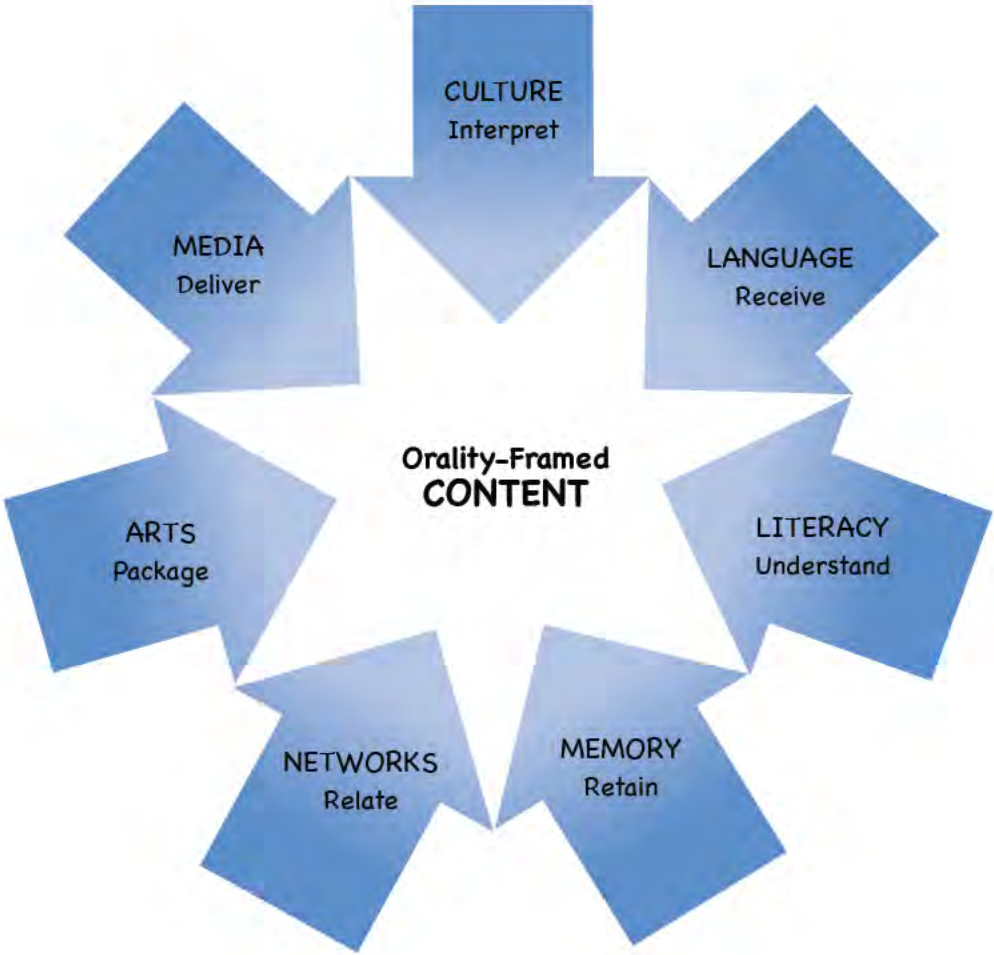
As we develop our ability as storytellers, we often feel the tension between telling a story accurately and telling it so that our audience is captivated. We want our audience to feel the impact of the story and to recall the stories accurately (though not necessarily with all the details).

However, most people are not interested in memorizing the stories. Likewise, most of us do not find it compelling to listen to a person reciting Bible stories. So in our approach, we put much effort into learning to tell the stories with passion and confidence so that the *images* we are sharing are vivid. It is our hope that people will then happily listen to the story several times and remember more of the detail with each retelling.

I know I prefer to listen to a well-told story with all the mystery and surprise rather than a simplified version that I can recite afterward. What about you?

For more information about the process we have developed, please email me at janet_stahl@tsco.org.

SEVEN DISCIPLINES OF ORALITY:
A Holistic Model



Courtesy of Global Impact Mission as is published in Missiology April 2010. Dr. Chuck Madinger leads Global Impact Mission and serves on the International Orality Network's Leadership Team facilitating the Research Task Force.

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