Beyond *Telling*: Embodied Gospel Communication

Studies in neuroscience and adult learning affirm the value of cultural, relational, and emotional means of knowing that extend beyond rational cognition. The arts are therefore a potent form of communication that allow all of us – not only those with special training as artists – to construct concepts and narratives that shape our lives and reflect the truth of the gospel. They provide a more holistic approach to gospel transmission that propositional *telling* strategies on their own miss.

As humans, we are compelled to make meaning of the world. This inherent potential is not only beneficial to human development, but critical because it defines our relationship with God and his creation. Consider the words of the psalmist:

> The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;
> let the many coastlands be glad!
> Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
> righteousness and justice are the foundation of
> his throne.
> Fire goes before him and burns up his
> adversaries all around.
> His lightnings light up the world;
> the earth sees and trembles.
> The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before
> the Lord of all the earth.
> (Psalm 97:1–5, ESV)

In Psalm 97, the composer grapples with the immense holiness of God in a poetic response to his sublime experiences of the created order. The psalmist's ability to purposefully construct concepts and narratives out of his experience is foundational to how he relates to God.

The overwhelming emotion that accompanies his experience of creation becomes the means by which the psalmist makes sense of a God that transcends the bounds of his imagination. This ability to make meaning emerges from his embodied experience and directly shapes his participation in that reality.

Discoveries in neurology and adult learning affirm what many of us instinctively know to be true – that our growth and development is fundamentally grounded in the cultural, relational, and emotional ways we engage with the world. Yet, as we consider the history and trajectory of missions, are our efforts aligned with this embodied reality?

Surely, "dominant Western culture prizes rational-cognitive ways of knowing. In a milieu where logic rules and reason prevails, emotional and embodied ways of knowing are often dismissed and ignored."[1] Has this faulty view of knowing also seeped into the way we live and share the gospel? New understandings of embodied cognition in neurology and adult learning demonstrate the value of an often-neglected missional strategy – the arts.

ARTS AND THE GOSPEL

Just as we must expand our missional approaches, so too must our compartmentalized perception of the arts adjust to the cultural realities of the people we seek to reach with the gospel. In Western culture, we often dichotomize art on the premise that it's only valid or good if the person who made it is specially gifted as an 'artist.'

However, this distinction is nonexistent in most other parts of the world. In fact, this belief does not even coincide with a robust theological framework that acknowledges "all the arts come from God, the supreme Artist and supreme beauty, as a gift to believers and unbelievers; art is a manifestation of 'common grace,' and serves the glory of God apart from the economy of salvation."[2]

Rather, if we could shift our perspective to consider the arts as "any heightened form of communication,"[3] they may offer us a deeper understanding of God's design for how people across cultures and beliefs construct and participate in shared patterns of meaning. After all, art does more than provide a platform for self-expression or entertainment. It also "challenges, cajoles, pacifies, preaches, warns, and admonishes – and can do all of that at the same time."[4] In this way, it has the potential to intersect with all dimensions of life.

In *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach*, missiologist Scott Moreau contends for the vast implications for the arts within the Great Commission:

Barcelona, Spain – Morning sunlight shines through stained glass windows in the Sagrada Familia Cathedral.

PHOTO BY MARC EWELL, COURTESY OF GEN.

> By the artistic, or material, dimension I refer to the multitude of ways people symbolically capture and express ideas, values, and themes of their religion or of their personal approach to their religion … . This dimension includes architecture, art (sculptures, paintings), objects (crosses), locations (cemeteries, holy sites), religious fashion and decoration, and so on. It also includes art as performance, from singing to sermonizing to creating music and drama.[5]

While this list is certainly not exhaustive of how artistic communication intersects with life and faith, it does touch on a very important point: the arts are deeply integrated into social, cultural, and emotional ways of meaning-formation. We create out of what we know and experience in the world, which in turn impacts what we learn and how we continue to develop.

NEW DISCOVERIES IN HOW THE BRAIN WORKS

Learning is a transformative act that intertwines knowing and meaning. Historically, academic institutions have treated education as a cognitive transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next. Yet, despite how it has been portrayed, learning cannot be separated from the daily lives and experiences of students and instructors. Over the last several decades, discoveries in neuroscience and adult learning have redefined our understanding of cognition, emotions, and human development.

It is now scientifically evident that "cognitive and affective domains of knowing are intertwined and inseparable."[6] Since emotions impact our perception, reception, and integration of experiential knowledge, it's critical for us to consider the implications of this research in relation to how people meaningfully relate to God and creation.

Embodied Cognition

Discoveries of brain development in learning reveal that our minds have a capacity and need to form meaning from our experiences starting from a young age. For centuries, scientists and philosophers held to a linear model of cognition that began with a stimulus which sparked cognition and initiated a response. Emotions, similarly, were categorized as a mere ramification of the stimulus-response model.

However, Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, a leading figure in the field of neuroscience, advocates for a revised model for emotions which contends that human cognition is not simply housed in the brain, but fully embodied. The study of *embodied cognition* builds upon a premise that "cognition involves both emotional and intellectual functions of the brain" as integral and integrated parts.[7] This theory of cognition explains how embodied beings require sensory experience to form an understanding of themselves and the world.

Rather than the linear, stimulus-response model, Barrett employs a prediction and correction loop to explain the role of emotions in human development – not as reactions to the world, but as constructions of it.[8] In essence, she explains, "your multitudes of prediction loops run in a massive parallel process that continues nonstop for your whole life, creating sights, smells, tastes, and touches that make up your experiences and dictate your actions."[9] Our cognitive abilities are grounded in the lived experience.

This predictive processing model has vast implications for how we construct meaning from our experiences. Brain scanning and developmental research shows that "the vast majority of sensory data bombarding our brains are not encoded because the brain does not pay attention to information that, in terms of its existing neural networks, is meaningless."[10]

Our minds need a means by which to sort the sensory input based on its relevance; emotion is key to this process of meaning-formation. We learn to distinguish between similarities and

Papua New Guinea: Men wearing huge fish masks dance and perform in celebration of the Lote New Testament.

PHOTO BY LISA VANDEN BERG, COURTESY OF WGA.

differences to determine which sensory inputs to respond to.[11] Ultimately, as we grow into mature adults, we utilize these categories, or concepts, to inform our ongoing perception and actions in any given situation.

Truly, "if you didn't have concepts that represent your past experience, all your sensory inputs would just be noise. You wouldn't know what the sensations are, what caused them, or how to behave to deal with them. With concepts, your brain makes meaning of sensation, and sometimes that meaning is an emotion."[12] Therefore, we cannot separate emotional and rational forms of cognition. They work together to construct who we are and how we make meaning.

Emotional vs. Rational Thinking

Learning is activated through the simultaneously emotional *and* rational thinking of the person experiencing that development. In her research on affective and social dimensions of the brain, expert on psychology and neurobiology in human development Mary Helen Immordino-Yang traces the shift in our understanding of emotions.

Her analogy of how we've culturally thought about emotions in the past is both humorous and poignant because it reveals a stigma that we've long held about emotions. She contends, "emotions were like a toddler in a china shop, interfering with the orderly rows of stemware on the shelves."[13] In other words: a nuisance to be contained or controlled with rational thinking.

However, based on our developing knowledge about the brain, we're learning that emotions are critical to human development and the ability to construct meaning from our experiences of the world. "The human mind grows and develops by engaging with deep, powerful ideas, and then working backward to inform the meaning that you're making."[14]

In line with what we understand about embodied cognition, Dr. Immordino-Yang's research affirms, "learning, in the complex sense in which it happens in schools or the real world, is not a rational or disembodied process;

Do you employ communications strategies that include the persuasive, life- and worldview-changing power of the arts?

neither is it a lonely one."[15] We utilize both emotional and rational means of knowing to construct our understanding of the world, and this is inseparable from our past experiences, culture, values, and relationships.

Judgment and Decision-making

A significant dimension to the role of emotions resides in its affective influence on how a person forms judgments and decisions. While emotions correspond with the concepts, or predictions, through which we understand the world, *affect* is "the general sense of feeling that you experience throughout each day."[16]

Consider the last time you felt annoyed with someone, even though you knew they did nothing to deserve it. Perhaps you simply hadn't slept well the night before or forgot to eat lunch that day. In such moments, "we experience supposed facts about the world that are created in part by our feelings."[17] Affect corresponds with the predictions we make about the world based on our internal state, or *interoception*.

In fact, Dr. Barrett contends, "interoception in the moment is more influential to perception, and how you act, than the outside world is."[18] Together, affect and emotion are critical in our ability to make decisions in response to what we feel to be true. Even the details that catch our attention or are memorable to us are made possible through this process.

Emotions in Adult Education Across Cultures

Let's not forget the added complexity that typically accompanies cross-cultural interactions. Emotions "vary from culture to culture. They are not triggered; you create them. They emerge as a combination of the physical properties of your body, a flexible brain that wires itself to whatever environment it develops in, and your culture and upbringing, which provide that environment."[19]

Human development requires relational, cultural, and emotional ways of making meaning out of the world. Therefore, holistic transformation must move beyond telling others about the gospel to more personally meaningful forms that do not place the burden of understanding on the hearer.

In adult learning, educators bear the responsibility to be attuned to the possible ways in which social and cultural differences may interfere with their students' ability to learn. Because "other cultures can and do make other kinds of meaning from the same sensory input,"[20] effective cross-cultural educators must recognize the need for holistic development that is cognitive, spiritual, and social.

Teaching needs to be framed as "the art of fostering development in the student."[21] Furthermore, "the burden of adaptation in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers," to establish a safe and welcoming environment for students.[22]

While the message of the gospel stays the same, are we communicating it in a form others are ready to receive without unnecessary barriers? If affect and emotion can drive our perceptions of and participation in the world, then how can we make our missional strategies more invitational and personally meaningful?

IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONAL STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION

These insights from neuroscience and adult learning signal to us the necessity of moving beyond rational and propositional communication to contextualize the gospel with artistic languages that connect to the lived experiences of the hearers. Two practical steps can help us move into a future for missions that includes contextualized approaches to the arts.

1. Tap into How Our Brains are Wired for the Arts

Have your missional strategies emphasized propositional *telling* alone?

Or do you employ communications strategies that include the persuasive, life- and worldview-changing power of the arts? Lausanne's Cape Town Commitment declares this: "Art in its many forms is an integral part of what we do as humans and can reflect something of the beauty and truth of God. Artists at their best are truth-tellers and so the arts constitute one important way in which we can speak the truth of the gospel."[23]

Unfortunately, advocates for artistic communication are languishing in missional structures that don't value the artistic languages spoken by local communities. They struggle to find like-minded advocates for the arts and can feel very alone.

2. Support and Engage with Arts-focused Networks

Many mission organizations struggle to know how best to encourage and educate artists and arts advocates for effective cross-cultural arts engagement. To meet this need, mission agencies and educational institutions which specialize in culturally relevant arts engagement are collaborating to form a growing number of arts-focused networks.

Currently active networks include: Lausanne Arts Issue Network,[24] Arts+,[25] Initiative Francophone,[26] Global Ethnodoxology Network (GEN)[27] and its regional affiliates such as Asociación Latinoamericana De Etno Artes (ALDEA),[28] European Community of Christian Artists (ECCA),[29] and Arts in Mission Korea.[30] These networks offer formal and informal training – from mentoring and workshops to BA, MA, and PhD degrees offered by the educational institutions affiliated with the networks.

The online interaction and in-person conferences offered by these networks will encourage arts advocates in your organization. They can also provide service opportunities linking your agency with the broader community of those engaged in arts in mission.

Especially crucial for cross-cultural arts engagement is training in *ethnodoxology*, the "interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions."[31] One option for this kind of training is outlined in Laura Roberts' article in this issue, "Sparking New Arts for Mission," but there are others. The key is to help artists and arts advocates to connect with others for learning, advocacy, and encouragement.

MOVING BEYOND *TELLING*

As humans, we are compelled to make meaning of the world. It is a significant part of how we relate to God and his creation. Studies in neuroscience and adult learning affirm the value of cultural, relational, and emotional means of knowing that extend beyond rational cognition.

The arts are a potent form of communication that allow all of us – not only those with special training as artists – to construct concepts and narratives that shape our lives. The gospel is not only a message but an invitation. May we be a people who move beyond *telling* toward embodied ways of knowing that deepen emotional and rational cognition and connect with the scaffolds of meaning upon which we build our lives.

> Let us *know*; let us press on to *know* the Lord;
> his going out is sure as the *dawn*;
> he will come to us as the *showers*,
> as the *spring rains* that water the earth.
> (Hosea 6:3, ESV, emphasis added) ■

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