

Shea Courses

The American theologian and storyteller John Shea is a preeminent representative of Narrative Theology. For him storytelling belongs to the essentials of the faith. In the stories of God and the stories of faith we encounter men and women, events and experiences that awaken life, activate love and open our eyes to a view of the world from a new and divine perspective.

When John Shea looks back on his own formation as a priest in Chicago at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, then he struck by the fact that this way of educating clergy trained them to provide people in parishes with a great many answers. The whole of life was neatly ordered, the paths open to us clearly structured, and for every question there was a patented answer. The starting point was the answer the Church gives, rather than the question the human being poses.

Yet, when John Shea entered the world of ministry he entered into an altogether different experience of life. People posed questions that did not have patented answers. And the inherited answers did not fit the questions burning in the hearts of the people. The search for a response to this divide between lived human experience and the experience of faith handed down to us was the springboard that led to the formulation of a narrative approach to theology. For in the stories of God and the stories of faith we find wisdom, guidance for life, orientation for our living and loving, experiences of and encounters with God, but they are never clear cut finished products. If we want access to all this, then we need to involve ourselves, to participate in the storytelling process by interpreting the great story of God and the great story of our life. We have to think, feel and fashion life with the teller of the tale.

A narrative spirituality is rooted in human experience. Eternal union with God may be highly desirable, but most people struggle on a day to day basis with managing the mundane. Stories are a path to God, because they are woven of the fabric of human experience. As John Shea has remarked, if Jesus had written a treatise on family life, we would have forgotten it. But Jesus did not do that. He told us stories, and we remember them.

A narrative approach to faith tried to break apart the word in the same way that we break apart the bread. Everything we need for life, everything that strengthens and nourishes life, is inside a loaf of bread. However, if we do not break that bread, then the loaf becomes a prison for the life contained within it. The same holds true for the stories of God, of faith, and of our lives. There is life and spirit within them. They hold within them that which serves, nourishes and maintains life. Yet, they become prisons for this life and spirit if we do not break them open, like bread. The challenge of interpretation is the struggle that can lead us to the experience of God.

In his book »Gospel Light« John Shea gives us a glimpse of what drives him. He speaks of Jalaluddin Rumi, a Sufi mystic and poet of the thirteenth century. Rumi wrote a poem entitled »Story -Water«. »He compares a story to bath water. The bath water is heated by fire. The heated water now carries messages from the fire to the body. It lets the flame and the skin meet. He remarks:

Very few can sit down
in the middle of the fire itself...

We need intermediaries.

Stories are intermediaries between the »fire itself« and those who would be warmed by it.«

The Shea Courses are offered by Siebenquell to all those who interested in the work and thought to John Shea and the narrative world which he opens up to us. These courses offer an introduction to his theology, and allow us the unique opportunity to encounter the combination of the charm of the storyteller with the sharp mind of the theologian. The courses are intended for all those who wish to know more about his theological and spiritual method. They are intended for people interested in stories as the mediators of the fire of God.