



CHURCH
WRITING
GROUP

Pen & SWORD

TO EQUIP AND ENCOURAGE THE LATENT WRITERS OF THE CHURCH

Ripening the fruit of self-control through storytelling

By Jan Merop

Fruit comes in all sizes, shapes and flavors—tangy, sweet, tart or somewhere in between. Some are juicy, spilling down one's face. Others—crisp like an apple. Yet they're similar—each refreshing and nutritionally benefiting the body.

Similar to the assortment of fruit is the diversity of people. Some like detail. Others want facts. Still there are those who relate through a story. When expressing to a secular audience the benefits of relying on God's Spirit to produce fruit in our lives, I have found storytelling effectively communicates to the secular market.

The reader relates to the transparency of the writer and is beneficially refreshed through anecdotes. So when I wanted to express the importance of self-control, I told a story.

I described watching my 6-year-old son trying to busy himself around the house while furtively glancing out the window. Yet, he refused to join his friends in play.

When I asked why, he shrugged and said he didn't feel like it. But after a few days of hanging around and longing to go out, he was ready to unload his burden.

"I can't go out and play with them anymore because they use bad words," he said. "I'm afraid that if I play with them too much, I'll start

using those words, too," he said candidly.

It was a blessing to know he would sacrifice play to not yield to temptation. Yet, I realized that this was one of the many times in his life in which strength of character, not retreat, must prevail.

The "persecution" of being ridiculed for not using bad words hurt. So I gently helped him see that his strength comes from God.

"You must be a boy who pleases God, no matter how anyone else behaves. This is how you set an example for your friends. When you're tempted, whisper a prayer for God's help. He will honor you for it," I told him.

Armed with a new resolve, confidence and courage, Chris went out to play with his buddies. He knew Who he belonged to, who he was and his purpose.

The solution completed the anecdote and opened an avenue to elaborate God's truth for the reader.

Parents must sometimes ask their children to do hard things that require strength of character—like self-control—when it would be easier to protect them.

I pointed out that in the Bible Daniel and his friends were carried

off as young teen-agers to Babylon. When the king wanted to remake them into Babylonians and forget their God, young Daniel purposed in his heart not to defile himself by adopting ways displeasing to God.

The story of my son side by side with the Biblical example helped me relate how Daniel's resolve and trust in God had been learned as a child.

By seeking God from his youth, God's Spirit enabled Daniel (and my son, Chris) to exhibit the fruit of self-control—ripening through faithfulness and integrity of heart.

Even the king had respect for Daniel's God, and a brief Bible verse fit nicely here.

"May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you." (Daniel 6: 16b, NIV)

Building hearts is a process, an art, carried out by the Master Designer. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—is developed gradually in a Christian who yields himself to God. Yielding says "I want to do it God's way."

Coming full circle, we may conclude this way.

Character building begins in childhood—like the ripening of fruit on the vine. ◀

Jan Merop has written a weekly inspirational column for over ten years, published in the *News-Sun* (FL). As a freelance writer, she has been published in *Decision*, *Clubhouse*, and *Launch Pad*. She has served as an Amy Internet Syndicate columnist and is a previous Amy Writing Award winner.

These excerpts are recently published letters to the editor. We thank the Lord for the ministry of these authors. If you have been published recently, send us a copy of your letter or op-ed column. Include your name, address and phone number, the full name of the publication in which your article was published, and the date it was published.

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► **Support for Shannon**

In response to the article “Books and Babies,” I must admit that I was a little taken aback at first. Many of us are not accustomed to reading of people at the age of 14 in a front-page news story.

A question in a letter asked, “Where is the honor in being a single teenage unwed mother?” This question causes me to think of my own teenage mother. Terrified of telling her parents of her pregnancy, she could have chosen to have an abortion. But she took responsibility for her actions. Because of this, I am here today enjoying the honor of motherhood myself.

We Christians need to remember that Jesus said, “I did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.” Many people, including Christians, mess up and make wrong choices in their lives. I thank God that Jesus is still in the business of forgiving and giving people not only a brand new start, but a brand new heart.

Shannon, my husband and I are praying for you and your little ones. I know many people care about you, but please know this above all: God cares for you!

1 Peter 5:7 says to cast all your anxieties upon God “for he cares for you.”

Considering the many high school dropouts who end up wasting their lives away on drugs, I think it is honorable that you wish to further your education. I know you will make a good accountant someday.

**Barbara Wieser
Kewanee, IL
The Star Courier**

► **The necessity of hope**

People can survive without food for weeks, as seen in famine-stricken Niger and in the rescue of 76-year-old Gerald Martin, who survived 18 days in his flooded New Orleans home. People have gone days without water.

But a person cannot survive a minute without hope.

When hope was gone, two policemen took their lives in New Orleans.

Many who have lived through attempted suicides recall that they had no hope in spite of having fame, fortune, family and friends. Hope is confidence based on awareness that help is on the way, even when it cannot be seen; that there is an answer to a dilemma even when it is not yet clear; that there is a cure or treatment for a disease even before it exists.

In this place of hope there is determination to keep on keeping on. As Paul of old recorded in Romans 8:24-25, “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope, for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.”

Another wonderful thing about hope is that it’s contagious. Hope expressed is hope shared to spring up in another’s heart. The media has a great opportunity to heighten success in a catastrophe when it focuses on stories of hope in action. Maybe with hope flooding the media, more than New Orleans can be rebuilt. Maybe our country can be revitalized.

**Sondia Swartz
Allegan, Mich.
Penasee Globe**

► **Double-minded people on the bench?**

With regard to judicial nominees (and others) being blocked from office because of their Christian faith, the media continue to debate the old argument of “separation of church and state” and how faith should be a private matter, strictly confined to church and home. How is that possible?

A genuine Christian lives what he believes. If obedience to the Ten Commandments compels a believer not to lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, murder or covet, then specifically which of these traits should be checked at the door when that person enters politics, medicine, academia, science, etc?

When that occurs, the Bible refers to that person as a double-minded person, unstable in all he does

(James 1:8). Would you trust a double-minded person with your life?

**Marsha Anderson
Mobile, Alabama
Mobile Register**

► **Searching for a port in a storm**

It’s the most dangerous time of the hurricane season again. Before 2004, the Tampa area saw its most disastrous hurricane in 1921. Our narrow escapes from the absolute worst could continue, but preparations should still be wisely made.

We know the routine—there are major things to buy like plywood, water, food and generators. Some families discuss what room in their house will best provide shelter. Others figure out places to meet if they get separated.

It seems these things will be our port in the storm, our safety nets. They’ll make us feel secure. But more often than weather disasters, we face hurricanes of the soul—troubling times when we can’t buy anything that will prevent or fix them. When the waves are so high, sinking seems inevitable.

We the people of the computer age, the students of “truth is what works for you,” the proponents of science conquers all, are at a loss because the logical side of the brain won’t sooth the situation.

Despite many efforts to deny it, humans are spiritual seekers. From the beginning of time they have sought the comfort of spiritual beings or objects representing them. Who puts this craving inside us? Is there really an “empty place” some people talk about that only a divine presence can fill? Sales of books like *The Purpose Driven Life* wouldn’t go through the roof if people weren’t searching for a spiritual center.

“God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble” (Psalm 46:1). This basic message, found many times in the Old and New Testaments, has lasted in people’s hearts through centuries, storms, fires, and wars. Unfettered by interpretations, vilifi-

Writing Toolbox

cations, denominations and regulations, it can be our port in a storm.

Sheryl Young

Tampa Fla.

The Tampa Tribune

► Job's chronicle a lesson for Hurricane Katrina victims

Two statements coming from media coverage of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath have stayed with me: "We have each other" and "If you know God, pray."

Ann and Vernon's Gulfport, Miss., home was leveled. They summed up their losses as significant, but not devastating, by saying, "We have each other."

The second statement is from Linda, interviewed by a Houston TV station. On Sunday, Linda's husband stayed behind to protect their house, and she hasn't heard from him since. She pled with viewers, "If you know God, pray for my husband."

In the Bible, Job's story is one with which sufferers can identify. Job's disaster saga included foreign invasion and forces of nature. Job's life was chronicled for such a time as this. After his immense loss, friends came to commiserate with him. They may not have given him the best theological answers, but at least they "had each other."

Throughout Job's misery and his later gaining back more than he lost, he was getting to "know God." One time, God asked, "Were you there when I laid the earth's foundation?" (38:4), or if Job had ever "entered the storehouses of the snow?"

After God itemized his resume, Job said, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (42:5). Throughout Job's life, God brought him to a better understanding of divine care.

Because of Katrina's wind and water baptism, Job's misery is multiplied by tens of thousands in the southern United States. Pray and cherish, keen reminders that human suffering can improve as long as "we have each other."

Cathy Messecar
Montgomery, Texas
The Courier

What's your point?

By Shaunna Howat

A t-shirt worn by my son has a photo of a rhinoceros with a huge horn. A line below the photo reads, "What's your point?"

As an editor and English teacher, that's my question for writers.

I read numerous letters to the editor and opinion pieces—many submitted by our readers, and many more in newspapers, magazines and online publications. Some of them I quit reading halfway through. They haven't made their point clear, and frankly they've lost my attention. I end up asking out loud: "What was your point? I didn't see it!"

That happens to you, too. When you read a news article or opinion piece, you want to know early on what you're reading, what is the point, and whether it's worth your time to continue reading. If you can't discern the writer's main idea by the time you've read the first four or five paragraphs, your attention wanders. Letters and columns are not jokes that need a punchline at the end. Rarely, if ever, is it appropriate to wait that long to provide the main idea.

That's why the most important job of a writer is to make sure his writing will grab the reader right away.

First, write a great introduction.

Do one of the following: Tell a brief story or paint an eye-grabbing picture in your reader's mind. Ask a question that you plan to answer in

your opinion piece. Call to attention an error that needs correcting.

Second, state your point. Don't wander aimlessly, going from one statement to another or supplying one bit of testimony or truth after another, without first supplying the main point that you intend to support. This is called the "thesis." A thesis statement is a sentence or two that affirms or denies something about a particular subject. It tells the reader early on what to expect. Then the rest of what you write will support that thesis. If your reader cannot tell what your main point is after he's done reading the article, you have not done your job.

The formula for concise writing is as follows:

- Write an attention-grabbing introduction.
- Tell your thesis (not necessarily in the introduction, but pretty close to the top of your article).
- Support your thesis with examples, quotes, data, more stories, encouragement, etc.
- Then finish with a motivating thought to get your readers thinking about taking action on what you say.

To violate that sacred rule of "make your point early" spells certain rejection by your readers.

Make sure they get the point!

Build your book shelf

Another way to improve your writing is to read, read, read.

Revisit the list of classic reading from a previous issue of *Pen & Sword* by going to our web site. Click on *Pen & Sword*, then scroll down to the list.

Challenge yourself to read what you like to read one month (maybe you prefer contemporary mystery novels), and then a classic from our list the next month.

Report back to us about your favorite books. What do you like to read, and why? Email us at amyfoundtn@aol.com.

Do you have books about writing on your shelf? Tell us your favorites! Why do you like them? Email us with your best book titles.

lambs who are ROARING!

Roaring Lambs awards...

...go to the writers whose letters are excerpted on pages two and three.

1st prize/\$200:	<i>Barbara Wieser</i>
2nd prize/\$100:	<i>Sondia Swartz</i>
3rd prize/\$100:	<i>Marsha Anderson</i>
4th prize/\$50:	<i>Sheryl Young</i>
5th prize/\$50:	<i>Cathy Messecar</i>

We invite you to submit your published pieces for consideration.

Criteria for awards are:

- **Appears in secular publication**
- **Teaches obedience**
- **Includes scripture**
- **Written in a spirit of love**
- **Exhibits skillful writing**
- **Persuades effectively**
- **Addresses a current issue**

Be sure to include an actual clipping, your name, address and phone number, the full name of the publication in which the letter appeared and the date it was published. Only one winning entry per author each 6 months.

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Crosswinds by Jim Russell

Reasons to write for Him are many

For me, there is no more noble purpose in life than to serve God in the high calling of the United States—a disciplined nation in this generation.

To that goal, I offer these ten reasons why every Christian who receives the *Pen & Sword* newsletter should be engaged in teaching obedience (discipling) through the local print media.

1. **It pleases God.** He created me for His pleasure and He is pleased when I willfully obey Him.
2. **Jesus commanded me to do it.** His final instructions in Matthew 28:19 were “Therefore, go and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”
3. **I am empowered by Jesus.** Matthew 28:18-20 says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go...” This is the most awesome transfer of authority in human history.

4. **I can do it.** Truth is compelling. If I can write a letter to a friend, I can write a discipling letter to the editor.
5. **I have Christ-centered resources through Christian friends across the nation.** In my hand at this moment, Pen & Sword provides biblical guidance, encouragement, and examples of previously published work.
6. **Others have prepared the soil.** Eighty-five percent of Americans believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. “...I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35).
7. **Jesus has appealed to my love for Him** when He said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15).
8. **I can be effective and productive in teaching obedience through the**

local print media. Reader surveys show that 60-80 percent of newspaper readers read letters to the editor—the second most popular feature in the newspaper. Two and one-half people read every copy. I can teach obedience to thousands.

9. **I am trusting in God’s promise** that “My word which goes out from my mouth will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

10. **I will pray for the newspaper editors and the reading audience that the Holy Spirit will illuminate truth.**

Based on ideas expressed by Everett Hale, I make this personal commitment:

I am only one, but I am one
I cannot do everything, but I
can do something
What I can do, I ought to do,
and
What I ought to do, by the
grace of God, I shall do. WJR

Jim Russell (1925-2005) was the founder and president of the Amy Foundation and author of *Christian, Can You Hear Me?* In the *Crosswinds* column, he opened his heart to the members of the Church Writing Group family. This article first appeared in the March/April 1996 issue of *Pen & Sword*.