

Bread and Bananas...

a story about Biblical accuracy and oral learners
by Carla Bowman

Her head bobs up and down. Her eyes are downcast. Her lips move imperceptibly in a constant rhythm with the movement of her head. This continues on as she repeats her new story over and over to herself, placing it indelibly into her memory, her heart. And then tentatively she looks up to see if anyone is ready for her story. No, it is not time. Others are still learning, memorizing, retelling.

But she is ready. Ana is always the first one to learn her story, Ana of the Mixe people group of Southern Mexico. She has that ability, that untapped talent she never knew about before this week. She surprises herself in the bright Oaxacan morning. No, she does not need more time to learn her story. She watches the others in their different corners of the huge room. She feels a breeze and looks up and out the windows at the amazing purple flowers on the jacaranda trees and beyond to the mist laden layers of mountains to the east. A cringe of homesickness comes upon her. How many times has she ever been away from her highland village tucked in middle of that mountain range? Less than a handful in her long life time.

"Ana! Ana!" She is startled out of her reflections by Victoria, the pastor's wife who watches out for her and teaches her new stories. Victoria can read and she is the mentor/coach for two or three non-reading women. She helps them learn new stories and choose the best stories for the women of Yacochi. "The group is gathering back at the big table", whispers Victoria in her gentle, smiling way. "Come, Ana, it is time."

Juana, Ana's elder by just a few years, a slight woman not over 4 feet tall with an expansive grin and a sparkle in her eyes, will begin with the first telling. She has learned the "Widow at Zarapeth" from I Kings. It is a story chosen for the first learning sessions for several reasons. It is short. It has a powerful message, it deals with a woman, a widow, and except for the name of Zarapeth, is not a hard story to learn. Juana's tongue trips up over the word *Sarepta* from the Mixe Bible, as it has every time she says it, but she goes fluently on to tell the story of the woman used by God to feed Elijah much like the Ravens did.

Juana finishes and without coaxing, without waiting, Ana's voice emerges in a slow, soft toned telling of "Elijah and the Ravens". Her mother tongue, Mixe, is a difficult language for outsiders but from Ana it flows beautifully. The women's eyes shift from Juana to Ana. They are surprised at the spontaneous way Ana begins just out of the blue to tell her story without coaxing.

The story ends. Everyone has chuckled quietly during the telling of Elijah and the Ravens. They remember day one of this training workshop when one of the storytellers put the wrong tone on the Mixe word for Meat and it came out as the Mixe word for Bananas. That had created quite a sensation among the oral communicators. It was not bananas that the raven dropped, they had exclaimed. Much discussion had followed about the dangers of telling the story wrong, even with one tone, the meaning can change and Biblical accuracy is gone. Now as Ana tells the story completely accurately they nod with approval. They have learned how important it is not to change a single word.

Almost without a pause Ana goes on to tell another story, the "Widow's Offering". Ana is clearly in her element and finding a niche for herself. Her head is still downcast as she tells the story in the cultural way, unlike the proud, determined, forceful delivery of the African storytellers who boldly face their audience and maintain eye contact, the Mixes lower their head, refuse eye contact and tell the story in a monotone. It would be unsuitable, culturally disconcerting and inappropriate any other way. The distraction of a variance would take away the meaning of the story.

She moves on without coaxing to a new story, the "Woman of Sunem". When her last narrative is over, Ana, looks up to see if she has told the stories well. She waits for the

approval of her accuracy team and the nods are given. Not a word was changed. Not a word was forgotten. No bananas.

Emilia moves the group into dialogue about the last story Ana has told. Ana smiles. It is the first time in her life she has ever really had the Word. The book had been locked up to her. She had never owned the Word, spoken the Word. Had she ever really understood the Word through all these years of walking with Christ?

Oceans away, Asharphi, a Hindi speaker of Uttar Pradesh, India is also learning to tell Scripture stories accurately. Her teacher Monica has emphasized Biblical accuracy from the beginning. "Some traditional storytellers or chanters of cultural or religious narrative have been known to change words", says Asharphi's teacher "Each time they may say it differently. Their devotees have in turn changed words and in this way the story is distorted. That must not happen with us, the Scripture storytellers". And so Asharphi, with attention to this admonition chooses new stories to learn each night. As Monica says, "Asharphi takes the help of her son who reads the story at night for her. She memorizes it at night in preparation for the next day, She is satisfied that she has chosen the right story relevant to the need. She has learned to remember a whole story without leaving out or changing a single word."

Yes, there are risks with oral communication. Even with a literate mentor, or a recording of the story, someone could tell it wrong. It is our mandate as trainers in Oral Communication methods to emphasize in fact to demand Biblical accuracy. We must accept nothing less.