

Unintended messages

By [Paul Keim](#)

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Those of us who no longer live in oral cultures may have lost respect for storytelling as a vehicle of moral authority. Just give us the facts, ma'am. We're data people, and we like it in writing. For us the parabolic arts may be fine entertainment, but they're an unnecessarily messy way of getting at the truth.

Yet all language can really do is tell stories. Words are the silk with which we spin out endless patterns of meaning--penultimate absolutes. The power of a good story may transcend the intentions of even the storyteller.

When I was a kid I heard Bishop John Steiner preach about a time when he went with his dad to town to get some supplies at the hardware, and the man behind the counter gave them each a glass of homemade dandelion wine. At 11:30 on Sunday morning our beloved bishop was describing in vivid detail the sensation of that liquid flowing like fiery silk down his throat and warming organs he didn't know he had.

In the sanctuary the sound of growling stomachs rose to a low rumble. I felt my tongue go limp, and I lifted my eyes to the pulpit. Brother Steiner went on to describe the evil power of that insidious ecstasy--and his firm conviction that had he ever allowed another drop to pass his lips he would have ended up in the gutters of Kansas City.

As I listened, I could not imagine one thing I wanted more than a sip of that homemade dandelion wine. The feeling stayed with me through the closing hymn and the doxology, and it lingered as I stumbled out of church, back into the real world. I had learned something about the spirituality of the body. (This story comes from my piece "When Love Sits Down to the Banquet" in the [Spring 2002 issue](#) of the journal *Vision*.)

Pastor Steiner's story was intended to protect us from the temptations of sin, and I did take that message to heart (sort of). But the truth it conveyed lay dormant in me until the inherent dualism of my theological roots finally gave way to something nonreductive: the physicalism of that homemade dandelion wine.