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Narrative Hospitality: Exchanging Memories

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Abstract

This article argues that exchanging memories can foster peace by allowing individuals and communities to share and reinterpret their histories. The author outlines the concept of narrative hospitality, understood as the capacity to welcome the memories of others. Narrative hospitality manifests in three ways. First, narrative plurality highlights the possibility of recounting the past in diverse ways. Second, narrative transformation shows how storytelling can alter the person who receives it. Third, narrative forgiveness refers to the story's capacity to heal past wounds. The article concludes with examples of individuals from communities long divided by conflict who have reconciled with their enemies through the practice of narrative hospitality.

Keywords: narrative hospitality, memory, narration, Ricoeur, peace, hermeneutics

My thesis is that an exchange of memories can contribute to the process of peace and reconciliation. I am drawing mainly here from an essay by Paul Ricoeur called *Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe* (Ricoeur 1996), where he considers the formation of the European community as one based on a sharing of narrative identities, which in turn is based on what he calls an exchange of memories. But before I get to an analysis of Ricoeur's essay, I would like to say a word about

the genealogy of narrative identity, which Ricoeur develops in *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur 1988), and again in his final work, *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (Ricoeur 2004).

Ricoeur was very inspired by Hannah Arendt, a colleague of his at the University of Chicago where they taught together and who stated famously in *The Human Condition* that if somebody asks you who you are, you tell your story (Arendt 1958). You do not just offer an ID card with your name and your medical record and your ethnicity, you tell the story of who you are – a process which involves you remembering how you came to be. Now, Arendt was not coming out of nowhere when she tied human identity to narrativity. She was part of a phenomenological tradition, which goes back to Hegel, who stated: what is is what has become (*wesen ist gewesen*)(Hegel 1969). In short, who we are now involves our memory, or as Wordsworth put it more poetically, "the child is father of the man" (Wordsworth 1807). Dilthey developed this notion into a more hermeneutic model of identity - "*Zusammenhang des Lebens*" (Dilthey 1965), the hanging together of a life by reconfiguring oneself through narratives, through historical rememoration. And then Heidegger brought this idea further into an existential analysis of temporality: the authentic self, qua Dasein, performs an act of "*Wiederholung*", repeating one's past forward towards our possibilities, giving a future to our past (Heidegger 1927). Such temporal self-retrieval and resolution is authentic existence. Ricoeur retrieves these three important influences on his work: Hegel's phenomenology of historical spirit as hermeneutically reworked by Dilthey and existentially amplified by Heidegger.

In his essay, *Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe*, Ricoeur shows how this is not just a question of individual identity, as for example, it was for Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, but it also applies to collective memory. In other words, the collective memory of a nation, of a state, of a people, of a community is itself a form of narrative identity, what

we can also call a 'social imaginary'. So let me say a few words about Ricoeur's analysis of narrative memory in *Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe* and then conclude with some practical examples.

In this essay, Ricoeur argues that what he calls narrative hospitality is "a way of taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the memory of the other, through the life narrations which concern the other". In the case of memorials, this task assumes the form of exchanges between different national or collective histories as we practice an art of "transference" or translation, allowing us to welcome the story of our neighbor or adversary. For one nation's memory of glory is another nation's memory of suffering. Paul Ricoeur was very aware that the European community, founded by Schumann and Monnet, was based on a resolution never to repeat the tragic errors of World War I and II, where rival nations had slaughtered each other. So today, he argues, we need to be as alert to the memory of suffering as to the memory of glory: victors and victims, he wrote, need to exchange places by exchanging memories which is already an invitation to change history, to reanimate forgotten stories out of our debt to the dead. This debt is a theme which he develops in detail in the final chapters of volume three of *Time and Narrative*.

Ricoeur is very aware of the fact that, in certain European languages, the word for story and history is very often synonymous. In English, we have the play of story and history. In German, *Geschichte*. In French, *Histoire*, as when we say "*Raconte-moi des histoires, je vais étudier l'histoire*". So it can mean "tell me a story" or "let us study our history". And this interweaving of history and story is central to the whole process of narrative healing and narrative peace that I am seeking to address. Ricoeur identifies three forms of narrative hospitality. The first he calls narrative plurality, the second narrative transformation, and the third, narrative forgiveness. Let me say a quick word about each of these before offering some concrete illustrations.

1. Narrative plurality

Every remembered story can be told from a variety of perspectives. Multiple readings of historic events – for example, the French Revolution, the First World War, the Irish famine, the discovery of America – do not spell a lack of respect for the singularity of these events, as it might seem. One could be prompted to ask how, if we have so many versions of the past, can we possibly establish what is historically true? Are we not susceptible to perspectivism or relativism, or worse, negationism. If there are so many ways of narrating the past is history not anybody's guess? How can we remain faithful to the facts, to the truth of what actually happened?

Bearing this in mind, Ricoeur retorts that a multiplicity of narratives may well be the best way of honoring the truth of the past. The very diversity of narrative accounts is arguably a fitting response to the inexhaustibly rich character of the past, the singular alterity of each historical moment. In other words, narrative plurality responds to historical inexhaustibility. One Official Version – laid down by state, nation, church or any other orthodox authority – would belie and betray the ultimately endless depth of the path. *Una voce, uno duce* is not good historiography. The multiple layers of past meaning call for ever new stories and histories. As Primo Levi said about the Holocaust, he kept on writing stories of the trauma so that it would never happen again. He didn't write one version of it, a sole and single memory of the Holocaust and his survival; he wrote several versions, and kept recounting his story again and again. Throughout the remainder of his life he never ceased reiterating the narrative in new and deeper ways. As we know from the practice of translation, there are multiple versions of the great literary classics. They are inexhaustible. So too in history telling: multiplicity is actually a sign and symptom of authenticity, a respect for the multi-layered singularity of the event rather than the

contrary. Recounting differently, says Ricoeur, may paradoxically serve as a guarantor of a deeper appreciation of the unique specificity and strangeness of each historical event. He writes:

> The ability to recount the founding events of a national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This capacity to exchange has as a touchstone the wisdom to share symbolically and respectfully in the com-memoration of the founding events of other national cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations. (Ricoeur 1996: 8)

There is no such thing as translation, there are only translations. By the same token, there is no such thing as history, there were only histories. And histories are tied in turn to a plurality of stories. The memory of a genocide for example, is served by both documentary accounts and fictional ones. In cinema, for example, we have both Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (see my analysis of these two movies in Kearney 2002). And historical fiction, as a double genre, offers many powerful examples of how history and story can mix, most notably in such great classics as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

Ricoeur adds that historical commemorations apply as much to moments of trauma as to moments of glory. And in each case we are concerned with both aesthetic imagination and ethical evaluation. There is a hermeneutic risk, he insists, in every interpretation of history and an ethical awareness of the justice and injustice at issue. History is never innocent. There are always victors and victims, and the power and permission to narrate is not given to everyone equally. Power is always an issue. Hence the need for many stories by many tellers and the obligation to keep on telling stories over and over without end.

2. Narrative transformation

Narratives not only transcribe; they transform. The historical past can be revisited in terms of unexperienced or unexplored possibilities, thereby providing a future for the past. In other words, history is not just about what actually happened. It is also about what could have happened, should have happened, ought to have happened. It is about the promises of a founding historical event, the possibilities of a revolution for example, which were inevitably betrayed to some degree or other. This is a matter of what Herbert Marcuse calls 'anticipatory memory'. We remember what the great revolutionaries and peacemakers sought to do, their mission, their manifesto, their promissory notes. Yet invariably, they all failed. And that failed promise is as much part of history as what actually transpired. So fictions (of the past's possible memories) are as important as facts (of the past's empirical memories) in recalling historical memories in the fullest, deepest sense. As Ricoeur puts it, history is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept. Narrative hospitality, therefore, is a way of also retelling untold stories so as to realize the yet unfulfilled promises of the past, bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel, where the bodies of the skeletons come together: "*Zusammenhang des Lebens*". In that biblical story, cited by Ricoeur, you have the dis-membered bones being re-membered into a living body. This is a crucial function of historical rememoration as narrative hospitality. Here, the hermeneutic model of memory meets the cathartic model of healing. We will offer some examples below which illustrate this argument.

3. Narrative forgiveness

Thirdly, a word on narrative forgiveness. By empathizing with others through a narrative exchange of memories, we can work through the wounds of the past so as to open up moments of what Ricoeur calls

"charity and gift" (Ricoeur 1996: 10). This involves moving beyond a contractual reciprocity of exchange to an incalculable order of charity, a leap that transcends the rules of justice in the name of something more, without ever abandoning justice. And what is this something more? It is forgiving the enemy and shattering the debt. We must remember the debt, and then and only then can we engage in shattering the debt. This involves, as Arendt reminds us, separating the agent of enmity and evil from the act. The act must be condemned and judged according to the criteria and laws of justice. But then comes the possibility of separating the agent from the wrongful act itself. There is more to the agent than the act. In Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov is rightly condemned for murder, but Sonia sees in Raskolnikov something more than his murderous act. And that is forgiveness in addition to justice. The something more than justice that does not abandon justice, it simply adds an extra dimension of 'charity and gift'.

Amnesty is not amnesia. Forgiveness at a collective level can never be based on forgetfulness of the wrong done. We have to remember the crimes, as in the Truth and Reconciliation Tribunals in South Africa, Rwanda or Northern Ireland, if we are ever to move beyond them. The crimes have to be acknowledged before they can be part of an amnesty that is fair and just. Wounds must be recognized, owned, and assumed, before one can work through them and move on. It is a two-step process: avowing and absolving. In the moment of pardon, pure law, says Ricoeur, is supplemented by the surplus gift of charity. And in this bold extra step towards a poetics of pardon, there comes a point where a narrative exchange of histories, memories and testimonies often needs to be supplemented by praxis. Narrative hospitality calls ultimately for performative hospitality. The move from text to action. Word becomes flesh. Story becomes deed.

4. Narrative hospitality – From Text to Action

Having briefly outlined Ricoeur's theoretical model of the exchange of memories, let me now give some examples. In 2010 I founded an international non-profit called the *Guestbook project* of narrative hospitality – a peace practice based on the motto, 'exchanging stories changing histories'. By way of illustrating Ricoeur's hermeneutics I would like to say a bit about the work we do: bringing together young people in divided communities who are invited to tell the story of their own particular side, their own tradition, and then listen to the story of their enemy, their adversary, their opponent, and finally come up with a third narrative which they co-create together from their different narratives. They first tell their own story, acknowledge the pain and suffering of the other's story and then imagine together a third story. One starts by expressing one's own wounds, then exchanges one's woundedness – the hatred, enmity, conflict and prejudice – with one's opponent; and only then, having listened to each other's stories and re-told them to each other, does one finally create a new third story together.

A personal note: I started the project first in Northern Ireland. I was born, lived and taught in Ireland for many years. And in the 1980s, when the war in Northern Ireland was at its worst, I was asked to moderate at a peace conference in Derry between paramilitary prisoners from both traditions, loyalist and nationalist. At one point in the discussion, a Republican IRA prisoner stood up and said: "I'm alive today because of a strange incident. I was almost executed by my enemy, a loyalist paramilitary. But here I am standing before you today". He then went on to recount how he had been part of an IRA bombing campaign, and how one night, Protestant, loyalist paramilitaries broke into his home, dragged him from his bed, bundled him into a van and took him to a barn outside Derry. He was tied up, blindfolded, and felt a gun pressed to his head. In desperation he asked his assassin if he

could smoke a last cigarette. His wish was granted and as he smoked the cigarette very slowly, he told the story of how he had become a member of the IRA - how his grandfather had been assassinated by the British army, how his father had been imprisoned and beaten, how his mother had suffered a breakdown and committed suicide, how his sister had become a drug addict and remained unemployed and clinically depressed, how his brothers had been interned without trial and tortured, and how eventually he joined the IRA and planted bombs. And as he was telling the story, he smoked a cigarette, and then his cigarette went out, and his story ended and there was silence in the barn. And he waited to be shot, for the gun to go off. There was silence for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes. Eventually he managed to free himself and look around. But there was nobody there. The room was empty. He walked home.

When he finished his story, a man stood up at the back of the room. He identified himself as a Protestant paramilitary ex-prisoner and said: "I was the assassin. I was assigned to shoot you, but I didn't shoot you. Why? Because when I heard your story, I realized it was my story".

I was very struck by this exchange of narratives where one enemy hears the story of the other and shares memories of common anger and pain. One realizes that the life of suffering is often a shared life. On the basis of that particular encounter, I set up the Guestbook Project which started with another exchange of narratives in Derry city. It was an experimental video called *A Peace Apart* which involved two schoolgirls from different schools in Derry city, one Protestant, the other Catholic. Each of them told the story of her own particular community: the Catholic nationalist Republican student told of how she had come from the Bogside area outside of the city walls and how for several hundred years her community had been discriminated against, no housing rights, no civil rights, no human rights, and so on. She

explained how, therefore, the IRA and the Republican protest movement came to represent her sense of grievance and injustice. Then the Protestant student told her side of the story, namely how her ancestors going back to the Elizabethan plantation had founded the city and created a wall so that they wouldn't be threatened by the native Catholics, thereby defending the notion of British civic liberties throughout the centuries. That is why she supported the Protestant community and the Loyalist campaign for remaining within Britain. And so both of them exchanged stories of how the war in Northern Ireland had represented a historical conflict between those outside the wall and those inside the wall. And in the process of the exchange, they made a video. In their film, having told their respective stories and heard each other's opposing histories, they exchanged their uniforms – because education in Northern Ireland is still largely denominationally divided into Protestant / Catholic – and they walked along the wall of the city, going into their respective schools. In short, they exchanged stories, uniforms and schools. And this triple exchange was accompanied by a huge sense of humor, humility and humanity. The students went on to become peace ambassadors going to different schools, north and south of the Irish border. And this was for me a powerful example of how young people could tell the stories of their ancestors, exchange memories of mutual wounds and then come up with a third story which they created by filming themselves changing clothes – symbols of their differing identities - and walking bravely into each other's schools.

5. Concluding Stories

Subsequently the *Guestbook Project* extended the model of narrative hospitality to many divided communities throughout the world, South Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, the Baltics, and so on. Let me conclude by revisiting one or two other typical examples to further

illustrate the practice of exchanging narratives.

Guestbook made several documentaries with Palestinian and Israeli youths – which proved very topical and timely. One involved a young Palestinian and a young Israeli exchanging stories about the origins of their respective Islamic and Hebraic traditions. They had both suffered from violent conflicts in Jerusalem and understood little about each other's religious traditions. The young male Jewish student recounted how in Judaism, Abraham's favorite son was Isaac, and how the covenant of Israel comes from that preferential choice of the most beloved son. By contrast, the female Palestinian student told of how in Islam, it is Abraham's other son, Ishmael, who is the favorite. The two sons shared the same father but gave rise to different traditions. And the two traditions are based accordingly on rival views of the favorite son. So what the students did was they exchanged roles. They exchanged insignia – the crescent and the Star of David. They exchanged clothing – the chador and the kippah. And they also switched places, transiting through their respective sectors of Jerusalem. And finally, they made a *Guestbook* documentary together of all this which was posted on the *Guestbook* website and visited by many Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, from Jerusalem and other parts of the Middle East. Countless other non-Jewish and non-Muslim people from different divided communities then watched the videos and discussed how this story of Abraham and his two sons related to their own stories and histories. These far away subsequent viewers in turn went on to make and post more *Guestbook* films at a global level. This was an example of digital storytelling as a creative contagion: a serial exchange of stories which prompted an ongoing exchange of histories, at the most basic, human, everyday level.

A last *Guestbook* example I would like to cite involves an exchange between a Turk and an Armenian. The meeting took place in Boston in 2012. The Turk had never met an Armenian before, and the Armenian

had never met a Turk. Both were visiting students in Massachusetts and were initially very wary of each other. They didn't want to sit in the same room, share food or even shake hands. But as they slowly began to converse something changed. At a certain moment the Turkish student admitted that growing up in Ankara the worst curse anyone could use was 'Armenian'. The historical genocide of the Armenians was suppressed from official memory – not mentioned in the schoolbooks or national history archives – and only surfaced as a forbidden curse word. A repressed term of the national unconscious. To this frank admission, the Armenian young woman replied that when she was growing up in exile from Armenia (generations after the genocide) her parents and grandparents never mentioned the genocide either (the trauma was too brutal and deep) – but the worst curse word in colloquial Armenian was 'Turk'!! So they both discovered in this digitally recorded in-person exchange of memories that the most forbidden secret, offensive word in both their languages was the one that named each other - curse words neither of them had been allowed to utter. They both shared 'blocked memories' of terms which named a trauma– as perpetrator and victim – neither of them had been allowed to remember growing up. In the case of the Turkish student, this was because there was national denial of the crime; in the case of the Armenian student, because her parents and grandparents wanted to protect her from the pain and stigma of that crime. And so it was interesting that in the exchange of stories, something cropped up out of nowhere: unbeknownst, an unpronounceable word slipped out from the unconscious, which was the word for each other. And out of that shared slip of the tongue came a sense of humor, believe it or not. Both laughed at the uncanny coincidence. And in the wake of this narrative hosting of each other's repressed curses came reconciliation and resolve: they formed a commemoration committee for honoring the dead – their respective "debt to the dead" (Ricoeur 1988) – in the

centenary year of the Armenian genocide, going from one university to another sharing their story.

So these are just a few Guestbook examples of how people from different communities remembered something that had been forbidden or repressed, a trauma not fully owned or acknowledged, and this work of double remembrance proved to be a 'working through' which enabled a new story to emerge which they could share with others. In the collaborative creation of a video together, the historical rivals surmounted their fixed binary opposition and turned enmity into empathy, pain into pathos, resentment into reconciliation. They produced a third narrative which could be shared not just with each other but with different people in different divided places throughout the world. A sharing aided and abetted by the technology of digital storytelling and transmission.

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