



SIEBENQUELL

The Failure of Imagination



SOURCE: KELLY SIKKEMA @ UNSPLASH

For many months, I have taken part in the preparations for a conference that is to explore the direction our work as narrative theologians might take for the coming years. Many proposals were made, but in the end, a great consensus formed around one topic: How shall we heal the failure of imagination? This topic has preoccupied me for many weeks and months, and with each passing day, I find new experiences of the devastating effect of lives bereft of imagination. Mostly I encounter and perceive it in the way people tell their stories.

Good stories summon us into a world in which we at first recognise many facets of our own ordinary drama of life. They mirror our experiences of birth and death, eating and drinking, the labyrinthine paths that our loves take, the struggle to do the right thing, the challenge of learning to face suffering and death and the ceaseless need to make choices, whether we want to or not. At first glance, we will look about and say: We know this place.

Yet, the first impression is often deceiving. Having awakened the recognition of the worlds that we know, the story goes on to fire our imagination. We are summoned to an expansive experience. It stretches the heart and the mind, because it shows

us more than our own stories originally perceive. Thus, a good story is exhilarating and disconcerting at once. It is exhilarating, because it pulls back the curtain so that we might be startled by unseen horizons. It helps us to discover untrodden paths in what we deemed to be trackless wastelands. Most of all, it is exhilarating, because it unveils to us untried possibilities. This is the invigorating moment when we know that Hamlet was right. »There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.« (Shakespeare, Hamlet. Act i. Sc. 5)

At the same time, a good story is disconcerting, because it shows us that the stories we told in the past were too small, too stifling. When imagination flares up in us through a good story, we breathe deeper, and thus immediately realise how shallow and suffocating the story was to date. This is the power of Jesus' storytelling. He knows how brutal life can be when someone slaps us in the face, but insists that if retaliation is the only response we can come up with, then we are suffering from a failure of imagination. There are many other possibilities to deal with aggression.

How can the stories of God and the stories of faith help heal the failure of imagination? By luring us into the grand conversation with God, where new life emerges Timothy Radcliffe describes it this way: »Revelation is being taken up into the endlessly life-giving conversation with God. In this conversation, I am addressed and I respond. My life flourishes as I get caught up in conversation with God, released from narrow limitations, my prejudices unknitted and my love deepened.«

The failure of imagination reveals itself when we take an event, an experience or an encounter and tell a reductive tale. This one moment becomes the whole story. The rich, complicated backstory is expunged. The motives of all the characters involved are single-minded and clear, without a trace of ambiguity or ambivalence. One episode is torn out of the context of a far greater story and then presented as the whole of the story. Moreover, we then tell such a tale as if its meaning is clear and unambiguous, insisting it can only mean one thing and therefore is not open to any other interpretation or discussion.

This is the failure of imagination. A good story will always confront and challenge it. To tell a reductive story is to limit the wide and spacious land of possibilities that God offers us in our lives. When we tell a story in this way, we not only limit the many layers of what we have experienced, but also the many potential ways in which we could heal the wounds, fashion a response or forge a new future. Then we remain the captives of our little narrative prison cells, contentedly miserable and satisfied within the suffering we serve.

To have only one story to tell is poverty. To have only one possible interpretation, answer or explanation for the unfolding tale of life is a failure of imagination. As the storyteller of the 2 Maccabees 15:39 says: »For just as it is harmful to drink wine alone, or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment, so also the style of the story delights the ears of those who read the work.«

A good story will heal the ruptures left behind when our imagination fails. We are convinced, at first glance, that we know the place. But as T.S. Eliot writes:

»We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.«

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