



SIEBENQUELL

»We would not die in that man's company...«



SOURCE: RUBEN JUAREZ © UNSPLASH

Recently an old and revered memory rose to the surface of my soul. I remembered a pub on the west coast of Ireland and the evening when a storyteller entered the room. The cacophony that has ruled supreme all evening suddenly abated, people made room, every person turned toward the chair by the fireplace where the storyteller had taken his seat. And there was the most intense and attentive silence. While the story was unfolding, an American tourist couple entered the pub and wanted to place an order. They were politely told to wait until the story was over, but they became rude and insistent. The owner quietly ushered them out and clearly told them, that since they would not show honour and respect to the storyteller, they were not welcome in his pub. Such is the way of a culture that values stories and esteems storytellers. Yet, this is hardly the universal experience for the tellers of tales.

Several years ago, during a General Visitation of my community, a member of the General Council approached me and asked me: »How is your fairy-tale institute doing? « That one disparaging question brushed aside the toil, exertion and investment of my life's work. With haughty dismissiveness, the pastoral and spiritual significance of storytelling was denigrated to the role of a childish pastime, an amusement undeserving of serious consideration and an undertaking unworthy of respect.

As biting and humiliating as that experience was, it was not the first time or the last time I was confronted with the unfathomable condescension towards stories. My narrative approach to teaching, preaching and spiritual direction has been frequently derided as being not political enough, not intellectually sophisticated enough, not sufficiently socially critical or even as archaic and unsuited to the challenges a modern and troubled world has to face.

Stories endure because they have a deep-seated impact upon us. They can awaken and enflame emotions across the wide spectrum of the human heart's capacity for feelings. They can immerse us into worlds of rich experience, while the numbers, statistics and definitions leave us cold, detached or even lost. Mark Turner, a cognitive scientist, has written: »Narrative imagining - story - is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, of planning, and of explaining.« While teaching a session on narrative theology, I pointed out that we do not need to understand how something works in order to enjoy its experience. For example, we do not know how a kiss works, but we know what they can do for human love, encounter and relationship. A woman immediately contradicted me and said, that modern neurology can explain how a kiss works in terms of chemical reactions. That is a highly dubious claim, since chemical processes always create the same result, but every kiss creates a different experience. Yet, her comment was typical of the condescending attitude toward storytelling. »Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.« (Hannah Arendt)

Stories participate in the fullness of life, and this fullness contains something chaotic in it. The fullness of life is a big, complex, mature, and constantly unfolding story. To experience the fullness of life, we immerse ourselves into the narrative and are drawn into the deep pools and flowing tributaries of human experience. In the throes of the fullness of life we sense all the dimensions and contradictions of our own lives. Suddenly we see the world and perspectives of the stories with our own eyes and realise these are places we have long neglected, but that we still know them. We hear with our own ears, and realise the words and sentiments are not foreign to us. Wherever a good and well-told story has been experienced, it allows the human heart to feel more deeply, to connect anew with old truths or to connect with wholly new truths, and to encounter and engage the world in which they live with a new panache and tenacity.

The storyteller seeks what every artist has sought since God soaked the world with his creativity. And every artist shares in the heat's desire of the Teller of the First Tall, the Singer of the First Song and the Weaver of Words: they want to share this fullness of life with someone who will relish this fullness with them. Did Antoni Gaudi start building his magnificent Sagrada Familia in the hopes that no one would enter the building? He wanted every curve of his building to sweep up the hearts of visitors unto heights of beauty, colour and light. Does Kirill Petrenko sweat over the score of Mozart's Coronation Mass in the hopes that no audience will ever disturb his thoughts? He wants to transform the notations on the parchment into sound-stories that wash over and flow through listeners who, even if they could read the score, could not hear what he has heard without his direction. Do the storytellers weave a tale in the hope that it will be drowned out by noise and slowly strangled by inattentiveness? They share the cry of Mark Anthony: »Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!«

It is said, that St. Francis once preached for the birds. But Jesus did not. »By every fire and shore, in the marketplace and on the hillside, with the children of the street and masters of the law he told stories of God.« (John Shea) I am not sure whether the General Councillor would refer to the storytelling proclamation of Jesus as a fairy-tale enterprise. My persistent and long-winded homiletic critics can accuse me of many things, but putting them to sleep is certainly not one of them. The unfathomable condescension towards stories will neither be broken nor halted by this reflection. But Sue Monk Kidd is correct: »Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.«

Therefore, I shall follow the wisdom of Jesus, the greatest storyteller of them all. He did not defend his storytelling. He told the stories. In chapter 5 of Mark's Gospel Jesus enters the house of Jairus after his daughter died. »When they came to the

home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.« (v. 38) He offers them comfort beyond their grief, a story of life beyond death, of hope beyond forlorn loss. Their response is unfathomable condescension towards stories. They laughed at him.

Jesus then does two things. First of all, he »put them all out« (v. 40). He does not plead with them for more understanding, argue his position or keep on explaining what he means. And he does not change his story. He threw them all out. If we are not ready to open ourselves to the Stories of God and the Stories of Faith, then we will not be there when healing happens and miracles are worked. Those who practice condescension toward stories will not be there when new life unfolds. They will not be part of the surprises of God.

Secondly, Mark tells us: »After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was.« The unwillingness, haughtiness and rejection of the crowd does not hinder Jesus from choosing life. Instead, he takes the willing with him. In the end, it is a father and a mother, three close friends. That is how we will come to an authentic religious experience. Let us consider what is happening in this room. It is the place where an experience of God unfolds. It is the space where divine Mystery shows unveils its presence. It is the space in which the deepest of religious experiences occurs, namely the restoration of life.

I have come to the realisation, that I have spent too much time during the course of my life trying to appease the critics and the crowd. The defense of narrative theology and the plea to take the stories seriously has become the ingrained habit of a lifetime. I need to heed the wisdom of my beloved master mentor, teacher and friend. »We always practice what we already know how to do«. I have fought that good fight long and hard. The time has come to leave that battle to others.

The time has come to take leave from those who tenaciously cling to their condescending snickering and derisive dismissal of storytelling as an experience of God and a way to the heart of the divine. I will leave them to their cold, clinical anaemic language. I will no longer plead for a greater openness to storytelling or defend their worth. They have every right to their world of indignation, and outrage, but for me it is too drab and colourless a place to pitch my tent. I will leave them to their relentless criticism of Church, society and humanity. There is too much ugliness of spirit in that for me, and it evokes neither the vision nor the passion to mould and fashion a world according to God's will. They are entitled to their world, but I will join them, nor will I justify to them the worlds I have chosen.

Maya Angelou once wrote: »My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style. « Therefore, I will keep company with the tellers of tales, the bards and poets. My companions will be the Evangelists, novelists and all the wondrous weavers of words. These are my people.

In Shakespeare's play Henry V the King has Westmoreland issue a writ of free passage and to pay out all those who would not stay to fight freely and willingly at his side. Then he issues the words: »We would not die in that man's company / That fears his fellowship to die with us.« For my part, I alter the words slightly to say: I would not live in the company of those who deride and belittle the power of storytelling, for among them there is surely no tale to steady the heart, renew our nerves and steel our resolve.

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