



SIEBENQUELL

Take the Stories Seriously II

The Heart of the Story



SOURCE: R. MÖNNERJAHN 2012

The past few weeks of my life have been marked by continuous crisis and the conflict it entails. As I struggle with it, I often find myself bemoaning the very fact that I, and the people I love, have to deal with this. I wish it had never happened. I wish it would go away. I wish it would end. Sometimes it enrages me. Often it overwhelms me. Always it tires me. And I find myself complaining, usually to God, about that which is always the heart of any story: the crisis of conflict.

When I teach people how stories work spiritually, they usually are full of wonder and enthusiasm when it comes to learning what the real subject of storytelling is: human experience. However, this basic insight of all the stories of God, the ones he tells and the ones we live, has a consequence which is less thrilling for us. If the subject of all storytelling is human experience, then the heart of all stories is the crisis of conflict. You cannot have a story without conflict driving it. If no conflict arises, there is no story to tell. Conflict is the heart of the story, because it is the heart of human experience.

Like the stories of God, we have *physical conflicts* in our tales of survival against disaster, illness and dangers that beset us. We know such stories in Exodus with the tales of shortages of water and food, oppression, slavery and being pursued by the enemy. We know them in our personal life stories as well, as we fear illness and brokenness and the energy it takes to

be present, believing and kind for the long haul. Will we make it to the end? Will we have the patience and the courage not to capitulate, resign ourselves or fall into depression before we reach the goal?

We experience *character conflicts*, the clashes between peoples, their motives, their freedoms and their desires. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Rebecca and Leah, Joseph and his brothers, Jesus and the Pharisees or Paul and the Roman authorities are all examples of the character conflicts that drive our stories. We know them in our personal life stories as well, we struggle with people we do not understand, with their irritating quirks and eccentricities, with their egos and our own.

And there are *spiritual conflicts*, occurring within us. We struggle with greed and desire, fixation and revenge, and with all the other ravaging hungers of the human heart. King Ahab wrestles with obsessive greed when he attempts to seize Naboth's vineyard. Jesus struggles with the fear of suffering and death in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know them in our personal life stories as well, when we wrestle with fears within us which we dare not show in the light of day, as well as in the anxiety that gnaws at our bones and the doubts that squeeze the confidence out of our hearts.

Conflict is the heart of the story. And it raises a simple, but serious, question. How will we deal with it? How will we seek resolution? We need to take the stories seriously. No one would tell, let alone listen to, a story in which there is no conflict. Not would we heed a story in which the characters bemoan conflict but do not respond to it. What keeps us turning the page is the desire to know how the characters will deal with the conflict. What will they do? To whom will they turn? What sacrifices and choices will they make? What kind of creativity will arise in them to surmount the difficulties that lay ahead? What will be the source of their strength and where will they find it? And, above all, is there anything in their lives worth struggling for? The heart of the story is conflict, because at the heart of all human experience, these are the ultimate questions which we will need to answer.

And so I grumble and rise. Each day I seek anew the words that will bring perspective and strength, the gestures that will strengthen the weary limbs and wipe away tears. And the crisis awakens the great questions in my soul. What paths will I be willing to walk today? What will I refuse to avoid, no matter how painful? What kind of creativity of spirit and soul will I bring forth this day, knowing I will need to do it again tomorrow? What sacrifices will I make so that others can live? And there is the constant question: What is important enough to me, that I would be willing to sign on and suffer through the long haul of a conflict ridden journey? It has been a constant going, stumbling, rising and moving on, the four actions that mark the rhythm and path of all discipleship. It is not easy to take the stories of God and the stories of life seriously, but without the conflict that drives these stories, there is no way to discover the deepest truths about ourselves. For it is only in dealing with the conflict of crisis that we discover who we really are, what we are really made of, and what we truly, passionately and deeply love. For all the advantages of times of peace and quiet, they cannot reveal the deepest passion and power that simmers within us. For that, we need the heart of the story.

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