

EXPLORING STORIES TO FIND THE STORYTELLER

Alexandra Asseily

The past is never dead. It's not even past. All of us labour in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity.... (Faulkner, 1951)

Who tells my story?

I propose that we are seldom the tellers of our tale. We are free to tell our very own story rarely. The teller is mainly the memory 'puppet master'¹ who lives way back in the past, feeds off the pain embedded in 'memory pits'² and dangles us in the present. We dance to these stories of the past, puppet prisoners - until we cut the cords. I will do my best to explain why and how.

Many years ago, I began to think about the role of memory, when I attempted to wonder about the civil war in Lebanon. How was it that in 1975 everyone, seemingly from one day to another, had transformed from happy, interacting, friendly people into killers, bombers, snipers, or like our family and so many others, become those 'innocents' caught in between. Where did all this rage and revenge suddenly come from? Were we really just 'innocent bystanders or targets, or did we also participate with our identities, judgements and feelings? What was my own responsibility in this war, as a human being, as human as the 'others'?

These questions led me to wonder about myself, my part in war and what it is in me which could trigger such violence towards the 'other'. After leaving our home and our 'dream life' under the bombs, together with my self-image attached to all the 'good works' I felt I was able to do there, I left Lebanon under fire and came to the UK to bring my children to safety and schooling. Prior to this we had moved them, like kittens, from one safe place to another, from one school to another, thinking that 'the troubles' would be over soon. After thirty years 'the troubles' are still not 'over'.

Reflection also took me down many roads, internal and external. I began to see and feel the echoes of war and exile, which had transformed my parents' and grandparents' and great-grandparents' lives in Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, England and France, and I wondered if I was not just repeating old stories, old pain. Whilst exploring all this, as if by chance, I became a psychotherapist. It was certainly the last thing I ever dreamed of becoming, however it has profoundly helped me to deepen my understanding of who, or what is telling our stories.

Whilst dealing with my own stories of war, exile and seeing the echoes going back deep into my ancestral past, I started to deal, on a daily basis, with the stories of others. In fact, every day, whilst working with clients, I enter a narrative: an autobiography, a historical novel, a film, a play, related by someone - and his or her ancestors. This might be a shameful story, a tragedy, a 'poor me' victim story, a drama, a crime story, a death wish story, an addiction story, a fairy story, a dutiful

¹ See below for further description

² See below for further description

story, or a love story. Each character in every story has a script to be listened to with compassion.

How do we transform these stories into healing stories? I ask - is this a story I/you want to keep telling? How long have I/you believed in this particular story? Is this a story I/you have invested in over and over again?

We can also look at how families have repeated these stories, nations, religions too. Lebanon has told the same victim story over and over again, always seemingly at the mercy of 'outsiders', not yet fully taking responsibility for its own cohesion. Lucia Volk (2008) in her paper *When Memory Repeats Itself: the Politics of Heritage in Post Civil War Lebanon* uses the Nahr el Kalb inscriptions to illustrate an aspect of this:

Nahr al-Kalb, a well-known archaeological site north of the capital, Beirut, consists of a series of historic inscriptions hewn into a sheer, rocky incline. For millennia, foreign elites used Nahr-al Kalb to make statements about their military prowess and political power. Recording significant change in imperial power politics in the region, this history book written in stone is at the same time a testament to profound historical changes that took place in the region and a celebration of repetition and resemblance (p.294).

This offers an example of how our stories repeat themselves, under the influence of what I call the 'puppet master'. My conception of the 'puppet master' is that it is an aspect of ourselves, and an accomplice of the ego, which uses grievances and fears, and makes them seem real, to the extent that we can fight over things that happened two thousand years ago, as though they had happened two months ago. This mainly unconscious part feeds off the charge in memory layered in memory pits. The charge is compounded feelings of humiliation, victimhood and rage, regret and any grievance that we, or our ancestors, or our collective group, have had with ourselves or others, which has not been released or forgiven. When we begin to take responsibility for these old or ancient resonances we can step out of the fearful power of the puppet master. As we forgive and become our fully gifted, loving selves, we cease to continue the cycles of violence embedded in charged memory. We become, therefore, a 'good ancestor'.

Examples from my work reveal the extent of the influence of unconscious stories that we have inherited and the liberation that can be experienced once these become conscious and are emotionally resolved.

Examples of unconscious ancient stories

One of my first clients was a young French teenager, who came to see me in London. His goal was to become a general. That's odd, I thought, in the France of today. I then discovered that he also had a driving belief, 'in order to be honourable, I have to die for my country' - a real catch 22. I won't describe all the extraordinary details of the case, but I later found out that this boy's ancestors had been connected with the crusades and the Levant for generations. His young cousin had run away to fight for the Christians in the Lebanese Civil War. Two lives today were being tragically and unconsciously driven by beliefs created in the crusades, by long dead ancestors.

In 2007, I travelled across the USA, talking to Y.P.O.³ groups with two former fighters from Lebanon, one a Sunni Moslem and one a Christian. They told their stories: each was aged 19 at the start of the war the Civil War in 1975. They had both become killers on different sides, although as individuals they had no recent memory of war, or indeed personal hatreds. One was convinced that his duty was to defend Saladin's heritage, and take power back from the Christians, who seemed to 'have it all'. His group of street fighters even called themselves Saladin's warriors. I later learned that this group would, on the Feast of the Cross in September each year, break a cross in half, a ritual that had been carried on since the time of the Crusades, when the cross for many Muslims had become the symbol of invasion and terror. The other felt that the Muslims were about to destroy his precious way of life, his 'purity' as a Christian.

They have now learned to forgive each other and are learning to forgive themselves, as I have learned to forgive them - as killers of 'the other', of 'man's inhumanity to man'. They now realise that they were puppets of the old and ancient grievances stored up by the 'puppet master'. Their rage and beliefs about each other came from this source entombed in 'memory pits' and fed by fear.

Recently, whilst talking with an Ismaeli colleague⁴, she told me this story. Her daughter, Sara, aged 8 was attending a school in the UK. She had a best friend whom she wanted to invite home. Her friend was delighted and both little girls were happy until the grandmother of her friend stepped in and said 'No, you cannot go to Sara's house'. 'Why?' 'Because the Muslims killed Hindus' (in India 150 years ago). Sara was distraught and puzzled. She asked her mother 'are we Muslims bad people?'

Examples of unconscious stories from childhood

Exploring the story of a man of about a 35, successful, handsome, who had a good job, a house, a Porsche, yet he couldn't get a romantic relationship to stick, we drifted back through his life to a moment in time – when he was about 3 yrs old. His elder sister was taunting him: she was going to take his tricycle and there was nothing he could do to stop her. In spite of holding his mother's hand, his sister had the power to make him cry, the power to make him feel powerless. At that moment, the small boy decided that he was 'weak'. It became his essential belief. To compensate for this negative belief, he decided never to let anyone have that much control over him again and he became 'a super-man,' but since it was in compensation, he never got the reward. He never allowed anyone else to get near enough, in case they would see how weak he truly felt inside. By learning to forgive his sister, himself and his mother during that short patch of life-changing experience, he became free of the negative belief about himself and able to share his strengths and his weaknesses without shame.

More exploring: a young man, also successful in every outward way, occasionally felt inexplicable rage for his parents. On a journey back to his childhood, he entered a moment in time, where he saw the family dog eat up his *Cat in the Hat* book. Now this wasn't just a book, this book was his life. As a lonely child in a large house, he had made the characters in the book his 'family and friends' and he 'lived' in that book. So when the book was eaten, it was his life which had gone, not the book. His parents said, 'don't worry; we can get you another'. It was

³ Young Presidents' Organisation.

⁴ Story recounted by Charlotte Hayani of Agha Khan University at the Museum of World Religions Meeting, 22 Jan. 2007

the fact that they didn't understand his devastating loss that caused his rage. I have never seen an adult so convulsed with pain, as this young man was when he hit the pain in that seemingly innocuous old story. Whilst learning to forgive his parents for that event, he became free of his rage...he became able to create a new story, free of that past constriction and able to feel their love for him.

Telling our own stories

We may get the impression that our tale is entirely ours, but this is seldom so as the stories above show. I suggest that our narrative most often belongs to 'history', that is to say, our childhood selves, our family patterns and myths, gifts, beliefs, our sex group, racial group, our tribe, our nation and our religion and above all to the beliefs, traumas and grievances embedded in these areas, which have yet to be forgiven and released.

From the examples we began to see that as one attempts to clear one's own narrative, which of course includes childhood, ancestral and collective narratives, one becomes freer of the puppet master, and the grievances held and used by it.

We are therefore often *being narrated*, rather than narrating, depending on the stories we echo from the past. Most of these stories are what we indeed believe to be true, but in fact they are often illusions upon which we base our lives until we can see them for what they are, and release them and the old and ancient grievances. As we do this, we reduce the puppet master's power to use the trigger of fear, and we can begin to tell our own inspiring stories. We can change 'history' not only for ourselves as individuals, but for our families, groups, tribes or nations. We can become good ancestors; we can become the narrators.

My purpose as a psychotherapist, friend, mother and grandmother, is to do my best to become author of my own narratives, and help others become true story tellers, to become free to tell their own authentic stories and to step fearlessly into their true purpose in this life.

Releasing inherited and collective grievances

I believe that it is possible to release old and ancient grievances through becoming conscious and compassionate for the 'beginnings' of grievances and great tragedies. If we look around us in our own families and beyond, we can find schisms, created by just a few people, which, in some cases, have ruptured the lives of millions. Therefore many decisions by just one or a few people in history have caused centuries of compounded grievances from an original charged memory, revived again and again in times of fear.

These 'beginnings' of grievances are held in what I call 'memory pits', where they are compounded by similar emotional layering. Old actions cannot be released in the present except by encompassing the past, the origin of the grievance.

A small illustration of this is reflected in my working with a thirty year old client who had not seen her mother's family until recently and by chance. When she was 8 years old, her mother, who was from a 'loving' Spanish Catholic family, wanted to divorce. Mother and daughter were banished from the family and she never saw her grandmother before she died, although she heard that her grandmother had asked to see her. In working with me, she was able to 'hear' and to 'feel' the deep regrets of her grandmother (for having brandished her own daughter and granddaughter for the divorce) and offer her own regrets too that she hadn't broken

through the barriers to mend the family divide in order to see her grandmother before she died. The schism and pain created earlier by both the individual and the collective, i.e. the Catholic belief system around the fear of the shame of divorce, was stronger at that time than the love they all had for each other. The ‘puppet master’ fed off the grievances and kept them all apart. This ‘apartness’ might well have gone on to the next generation without my client’s decision to heal the wounds by taking responsibility to neutralise the charge- by forgiving that particular memory’s unhappy resonance.

Probing one’s memory pit is like an archaeological dig, where our memory, modern, old and ancient, both personal, ancestral and collective, unfolds layer upon layer of experiences which are often charged with emotion. As with archaeology, we find things buried, which require our knowing, acknowledging and understanding, as well as a ‘carbon dating’ in order to reveal how, and why, they were hidden and buried. As we bring these old elements to the light, they can be appraised with love and trust, rather than by judgement or fear. Every trauma in our own lives, large or small, buries treasures and causes pain, this is then added to the layers of unreleased traumatic memory of similar resonance from our parents and ancestors, and our collective groups. These (charged) memories are now being looked at not only by archaeologists, psychotherapists but also by geneticists.

Indeed, many geneticists now think that the behaviour of our genes can be altered by experience – and even these changes can be passed on to future generations. This finding may transform our understanding of inheritance and evolution. Hunter (2008) argues that epigenetic inheritance ‘is implicated in the passing down of certain cultural, personality or even psychiatric traits’ (online).

Hunter goes on to give an example of how historical ‘insults’ such as Oliver Cromwell’s ‘brutal re-conquest of Ireland in 1649, have led to an ‘embedding’ of attitudes within the affected communities that has persisted for generations’. Although as the author suggested that this phenomenon has been explained by Richard Dawkins’s theory of memes⁵, which proposes that cultural or intellectual traits are passed down via non-genetic mechanisms such as storytelling, the epigenetic inheritance as possible cultural transmission triggers Hunter to ask such important questions: ‘Could it be that historical traumas, such as transatlantic slavery, leave some kind of genetic mark on the descendents of their victims?’.

Returning to our earlier discussion on ‘the memory pit’, it seems to be crucial to acknowledge the buried ‘archaeological sediments’ and to unfold and release the hidden and charged roots of our deep memories. In this way we can free ourselves of the puppet master’s power. We can then receive the gifts of true purpose from our family, ancestors and collective history that previously were beyond our reach.

We are not masters of our memories until we can release the emotional charges buried in memory pits, through understanding, compassion and forgiveness which neutralise the emotional charge that our puppet master feeds off, and uses to enslave us; chaining us to old grievances which are triggered, again and again by fear, or hidden guilt.

⁵ Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford , 1976), chapter 11.

Multiple selves: the saboteur within

Most of us imagine that we have nothing to do with sabotage – that it is ‘out there’ a case of ‘evil people doing evil things’ to good people doing good things. It might help our worldview to start looking at ourselves and to notice how active some of our own home grown ‘terrorists’ can be.....inside us! And how very important it is to acknowledge and listen to them compassionately. Often the most hidden away part of ourselves holds the unappreciated gift or essence of ourselves, which can allow us to live fully and freely- without compensating for some perceived and fearful lack.

The part of ourselves we crush for ambition's sake, will come back years later, knife in hand, bent upon the destruction of its destroyer. Carl Jung

After doctors had given up on the cancer of a colleague's mother, he wanted to see if he could find the root of it and heal it from there. All her life his mother had been a kind, loving, caring person, in fact had ‘given her life to others’ as a nurse, as well as a mother. When the last of her children left home, she felt that her life must be over, as her identity was so tied up with being the good mother and she had retired from being a nurse. However, she had entirely ignored that there was another part of her that had been judged and unacknowledged by the carer identity as being ‘bad and selfish’. In fact this part had been a lively, childish, energetic extrovert, deemed as a ‘show off’ in a conservative, Presbyterian family. It was this part who, unacknowledged and unappreciated, had become ‘the saboteur’ – having not been allowed any freedom to express herself clearly, nor able to give these other gifts to the world. Sacrificing, controlling or bullying ourselves, as perhaps we believed we were by significant people from childhood, very often creates ‘inner saboteurs’, who, unable to express their true purpose, end up by creating havoc...until we listen. Often whole families have done this for generations.

In this story, my colleague gently found and helped his mother accept the ‘pure essence’ identity she had long shunned and hidden away. In this manner her ‘saboteur’ was allowed its rightful place and no longer needed to make itself heard (by creating illness), His mother released her super-caring, compensating personality, which had thought it should die, as it had no further job to do and began to care for herself -by having more fun She lived on well beyond the expectations of the doctors.

Another ‘saboteur’ story can serve as a further example of this interpretation. A successful academic colleague found that his life was being hampered by being unable to complete writing his books and papers on time. He would always stop a chapter or so short, and that would hang heavily upon him for months, if not years. During an hour or so together we discovered that the part of him that was ‘terrorising’ his life in this way, was the part of him that as a ‘good child’, caught between an older and a younger brother, had felt unloved and unnoticed by busy parents, and created a strategy to get some attention – which was better than none –which was to be late: late for school, late with home-work, etc. This process continued in his adult life, as he became the busy ‘parent’ to his own ‘saboteur’ part, pressuring and controlling himself in an unloving and judgemental way to be the perfect and caring professor to his students, with no regard to his own needs.

Integrating ‘the saboteur’, often judged to be an ‘evil and bad’ part,, with the ‘good, dutiful’ part and allowing love to flow equally to both, allowed him to escape the

puppet master's hold on the grievances, both his own and his parents' and grandparents' and the collective ethic of Christian sacrifice, duty, hard-work struggle and that they had all inherited without enough love to balance it i.e. *doing* love, with resentment, instead of *being* loving, with self acceptance.

It is possible that there may be larger scale parallels to these individuals' stories, indeed societies and nations are composed of groups of individuals, although some would argue that the whole may constitute more than the sum of the parts. Is it possible that the process of healing at the individual level has the potential to lead to healing at a societal level? I believe so.

As I write this, the tragedy of the Middle East continues...a cycle of violence, with stories that require healing, not more tanks and bombs. For the last 30 years, after each attempt I have witnessed to root out and destroy terrorists by terrorising whole populations, I have argued that this is a contradiction in terms: the more you persecute terrorists, the more terrorists you create. So 'crushing terrorism' cannot work, it can only make things much worse.

Old actions cannot be released in the present except by encompassing the past. The souls of the many who have fought and suffered, often for centuries of compounded grievances, and who at some level are still suffering, deserve for their pain to be understood and their stories to be heard. This, I believe, can be done through a deep level of prayer with compassion and understanding.

Therefore, the living and the dead hold each other in a kind of unseen contract to continue 'the fight' to stay faithful to the wounded memories. (This is the puppet master's territory in memory pits). The true work of the living is to take responsibility and to become conscious of these 'contracts or echoes' and to release them. When we can value the positive intentions of those who have gone before us, even if their lives and actions seem to have been destructive and wrong, and forgive them, we can all become good ancestors, and tell our own inspiring stories to our children.

References

- Hunter, P. (2008) What Genes remember, *Prospect magazine* http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=10140
- Volk, L. (2008) When Memory repeats itself: The Politics of Heritage in Post Civil War Lebanon, *J. Middle East Stud*, Cambridge University Press, 2008,