

On The Power of Narrative

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To be human is to exist in a world of language and storytelling. Narratives carry with them the power to unite and divide, define and re-define both individuals and social groups. In his introduction to Robert Fagles' translation of Homer's *Iliad*, one of the oldest preserved writings in human history, Bernard Knox wrote, “[t]hree thousand years have not changed the human condition in this respect; we are still lovers and victims of the will to violence, and so long as we are, Homer will be read as its truest interpreter” (29). We may take for granted the idea that human beings are essentially and undeniably violent, but in a post-world-war era of continuing global conflict, it is critical that we re-evaluate such a notion. What I would like to suggest here is that narrative has shaped who we are, how we identify, how we perceive the world and act as moral agents. This implies that we, as the creators and interpreters of these narratives, have some agency to shape and engineer future civilization through stories. We therefore have a responsibility to use this circular interpretive relationship between narrative and the human condition to attempt to bring about a world that serves the interests of all of us.

We can see examples of this agency in revisionist interpretations of key cultural texts. Consider the Biblical creation story of Adam and Eve, ubiquitous in North American society today. It is a story of creation, in which God creates Adam, the first man, to tend the utopian Garden of Eden. Seeing that Adam is lonely, God creates all the animals of the Earth in an attempt to provide a companion, but fails, and so resorts to creating Eve, the first woman, out of Adam's own body. The only fruit they cannot eat in the garden is that which grows on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the serpent persuades Eve to try the fruit of the tree, and she finds that she does not immediately die as God had warned, she gives the fruit to Adam, giving them both knowledge of good and evil. God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgression by kicking them out of the garden, and declaring that man will forever have to work to cultivate the land for nourishment, and woman will forever experience great pain in childbirth (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Gen 2-3).

The most common interpretation is that this is a moral story about the origin of sin, the fall of man, and—because Eve was presumably responsible for the fall—the lower status of women. However, this view is not immediately supported by the biblical text itself. This interpretation is what has been handed down by theologians who were influenced by their own cultural contexts, who had their own personal agendas, and who needed their interpretation of the story to be compelling enough to be persuasive to the minds of the faithful. A more allegorical approach, one which pays close attention to the language used in the story of Adam and Eve, could challenge this traditional view. We could interpret the narrative instead as a moral story about the duplicity of God, the origin of agriculture, and the value of woman as a necessary counterpart for man's fulfillment and enlightenment. The text explicitly depicts God as a deceiver in his warning that Adam and Eve will die if they eat the tree's fruit. The banishment from the garden and being forced to work the land for food can be seen as an allegorical explanation for the origin and necessity of agriculture practiced by the ancient Israelites, and rather than emphasizing Eve's responsibility for disobeying God, the text could just as easily be seen to emphasize her responsibility for discovering the truth and bringing wisdom and knowledge to humanity. One could even argue that Eve represents a mother-goddess figure, “because she was the mother of all living,” (Gen 3:20) whose fall from divinity may have required an explanation within the context of the Israelite belief in a single male deity (Dolansky).

What purpose do these two different interpretations of Adam and Eve serve? On the one hand, we have a story which establishes the supreme authority and punitive nature of God, the sinful nature of man, and the inferiority of women in relation to men. On the other hand, we have a story which establishes the authority of knowledge, the equanimity between men and women, and provides an allegorical origin for human beings, wisdom, agriculture and childbirth. I argue that the former interpretation reflects a patriarchal and dogmatic society's values, while the latter reflects a society moving towards gender equality and more secular values, and that this is why the two interpretations exist. This comparison allows us to see how the narrative has become a kind of sparring arena between

patriarchal and feminist values. Today, the allegorical interpretation presents a very real benefit in a patriarchal society that is working towards equal rights and values for women. On the other hand, there was also certainly a benefit to be found in the more literal interpretation at a time in history when patriarchy was the unquestioned standard, and anything less than the literal interpretation of scripture as the direct word of God was considered heretical.

We choose to imbue one narrative with more significance than another for a variety of reasons. Although it may be tempting to dismiss the revisionist reading of Adam and Eve for taking too much liberty in its interpretation, its relevance to the modern context in which we live gives the allegorical approach some leverage over the traditional one. At the same time, the more traditional interpretation gains its authority, not from its relevance, but from its longevity. Cognitive scientist Jim Davies, in his book *Riveted: The Science of Why Jokes Make Us Laugh, Movies Make Us Cry, and Religion Makes Us Feel One with the Universe*, describes various psychological effects and biases which may contribute to why we find some narratives more compelling than others. One of these is the effect of idea-effort justification. When we have put some effort into arriving at a certain belief, say for example the belief in original sin, we tend to feel more justified in our belief because of the effort involved, which makes it all the more difficult to revise. We also have a tendency to interpret ambiguity in a way that agrees with our own pre-existing values and ideas, and react with skepticism to information which challenges them. According to Davies, “[d]ifferent interpretations will result whenever people are in a situation in which meaning is ambiguous and they have a favorable attitude toward the author—which is most of the time. People tend to seek out information they believe they will agree with (this is the congruence bias)” (131).

This bias plays a significant role, especially when it comes to religious texts which are said to be authored by God. People who are very religious want to believe that their scripture is the literal word of God, and so they do, while others who want to find a feminist narrative in Adam and Eve can just as easily do so without concern for the authors. We can easily imagine a group of people who are

unwilling to give up their literal interpretation of Adam and Eve, because they would be transgressing against their creator, and another group of people who turn the narrative into a vehicle to advance their own agenda, which is in harmony with the modern values held by a growing proportion of the population. It is possible that, given enough time, one of these narratives will prevail over the other depending on how social values evolve, or that they will end up being fused together in a new, even more relevant narrative. Either way, any narrative that persists through time must remain relevant to the values of the majority; narratives which fail to meet this requirement will simply fall out of popularity and eventually lose their influence.

What I hope to have shown so far is that certain very real present day conflicts are rooted in the stories which shape our values, and that our changing values in turn change our stories. The way these stories are interpreted and re-told is vital to the way we resolve certain conflicts. In Canada for example, our cultural narrative can often seem ambiguous and problematic, and I would say that this is actually because we live in a society with at least two conflicting narratives. It would be difficult to argue that Canada is not a primarily Christian country. Despite its reputation for democratic values, including religious tolerance and multiculturalism, we have never elected a non-Christian prime minister (Religious Affiliations of Canadian Prime Ministers). However, before European colonization introduced Christianity into North America, Canada was already home to an Indigenous population which perceived the world in a radically different way. Indigenous narratives are often non-literate and highly symbolic, with correspondingly different implications for Indigenous values and behaviours. Contemporary Indigenous medicine man Lame Deer (1903-1976) described how these different modes of knowing create divisions between Indigenous people and settlers:

We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are a part of nature, part of ourselves...What to you seems commonplace to us appears wondrous through symbolism. This is funny, because we don't even have a

word for symbolism, yet we are all wrapped up in it. You have the word, but that is all.

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Although Lame Deer is speaking from the 20th century context, his insights are just as applicable to the differences between the original European settlers who clashed with the Indigenous North Americans when colonizing the continent. It is easy to see how, to a technologically advanced society built on a foundation of literature and religious doctrine, the symbol-rich worldview and language of the Indigenous peoples might have appeared to be primitive and inferior. The result has been a brutal legacy of colonization and assimilation, leaving the once prosperous Indigenous First Nations people as the most underprivileged minority in North America, who continue to struggle for autonomy, sovereignty and basic quality of life.

Lame Deer's observations also help explain why, despite the fact that biblical narratives remain dominant in North American culture, the Indigenous narratives and worldviews have persisted in the Indigenous population, and are now gaining popularity as numerous movements work to raise awareness of the history of colonization in North America. Indigenous people continue to bear the terrible burden of being the inheritors of centuries of prejudice and oppression. This division between Indigenous and settler populations in North America can be traced back to the differences in the narrative traditions each culture adhered to at the time of colonization.

Thomas King illustrates these differences in the opening chapter of his book *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, describing in his own words an Indigenous creation story. The story can be summarized as follows: When the Earth was made entirely of water, there was a pregnant woman from an ancient world in the heavens who was led by her own curious nature to dig all the way through her planet, causing her to fall out the other side through the sky towards the Earth, and after being safely caught by the sea birds and placed on the back of a turtle, she asked the animals to dive and find some mud at the bottom of the ocean. When they finally produced a small hand full of mud, the woman sang and danced, causing the mud to grow until there was land all over the Earth, after which she promptly

gave birth to twins, who shaped the land into mountains and valleys, rivers and forests, providing habitat and food and so on for those animals who would live there. The animals, pleased with the new world that has been created for them, suggested that maybe the twins should create humans as well, and they did, reassuring the animals that the humans will not cause them any trouble. (10-20)

King then moves on to briefly describe the Adam and Eve story, and provide a very insightful comparison of the two narratives. (21-25) The biblical creation story provides us with a singular, infallible deity who is the sole creator of the world and the supreme authority over that world, while many Native creation stories depict a deity, often a woman, “of limited power and persuasion, and the acts of creation and the decisions that affect the world are shared with other characters in the drama.” (24) In Adam and Eve, the world “begins in harmony and slides towards chaos,” (24;25) while the Indigenous narrative “begins in chaos and moves toward harmony” (25). The point here is that the differences in the two narratives correspond to differences in culture, behaviour, and consequently, perception of other cultures and behaviours. This is generally applicable to any two narratives which fundamentally disagree with each other. Davies again provides scientific insight into the underlying psychological mechanisms which cause this dissonance between narrative traditions: “[D]oubt causes cognitive dissonance, which is a discomfort as a result of contradictory feelings and thoughts...People will act to resolve the dissonance, sometimes irrationally...When those around us believe the same things we do, we take this as a reason to believe it. So if we can convince the people around us of the belief, then the dissonance is attenuated” (77).

One can easily imagine that the original European settlers, faced with an alien worldview, language and religious system which cast doubt on their own beliefs would have reacted as Davies describes, irrationally seeking to resolve the cognitive dissonance they experienced by imposing their worldview upon the Indigenous people they encountered. They did not have access to any context which could help them see the Indigenous people as anything but inferior. Thomas King provides an excellent illustration of the potential different narratives have to dictate peoples' behaviours with a

series of hypothetical questions:

What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? Someone who, in the process of creation, found herself lost from time to time and in need of advice, someone who was willing to accept a little help with the more difficult decisions? What if the animals had decided on their own names? What if Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness? I love you, God could have said, but I'm not happy with your behaviour. Let's talk this over. Try to do better next time. What kind of world might we have created with that kind of story? (27-28)

It is, of course, purely speculative to imagine a world where Indigenous and European narratives were compatible enough to see the two cultures co-exist in peace and harmony. Nevertheless, such speculation makes it impossible to ignore the power of narrative. If we can identify a causal relation between our narratives and our behaviours and attitudes, then we have an obligation to seek, perpetuate, and create narratives which foster virtuous behaviours and benevolent attitudes. However, if we can use narratives to shape social values, others can also use narratives to shape us. Rather than revealing moral truths, narrative can be used just as easily to deceive and pacify its audience. Despite the morally troubling reality of there being numerous glaring injustices in the world, we often appeal to storytelling to justify this state of affairs. Part of what is most compelling about a good story is that it can convince us that the world is, despite appearances, just and rational. Describing this 'just world' phenomenon, Davies writes:

One of the attractive things about many religions is that they promote the just world belief. It's sometimes all too apparent that, in the world we see today, terrible things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. This is disturbing. A belief system that promotes a view of the world in which everyone gets what they deserve can be pretty attractive. Religions step in to make us feel better about injustices.

(201-202)

We could also characterize the current global warming arguments as a conflict between the narrative put forth by science, and the aforementioned 'just world' phenomenon which religious narratives promote. To believe in a divinely just world and, at the same time, accept that our own reckless behaviour could cause environmental, economic, political and social catastrophe, seems a perfect example of cognitive dissonance. It is easier to believe in the just and divine governance of a benevolent creator, and rationalize away the idea that it is our responsibility to govern our own world on a grand scale.

One way we can use narrative to engineer social progress involves finding common themes and characters. For example, the now infamous war on terror could be described as a conflict between western and middle-eastern values and worldviews. On the one side, we have a worldview largely motivated by Judaism and Christianity, and their interpretations of the Bible. On the other, we have a worldview motivated by a very different cultural identity rooted in Islam and various interpretations of the Qur'an. Both of these divided cultural groups have tools within their religious texts to find common ground, such as looking into the past to find a common ancestor. All three faiths can be referred to as Abrahamic religions because they all claim to be descendants of the biblical figure Abraham. As Bruce Lincoln describes in *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, finding a common ancestor is one way divergent social groups can sympathize with each other and find a new unified identity that promotes harmony between them (15-26).

I contend that through time, many of the major issues facing humanity are the results of dissonant cultural narratives which often share common roots and display the potential for resolution through creative storytelling. Whether we are aware of it or not, narrative is a compelling force with powerful effects on our thoughts and behaviours, and which we use, whether deliberately or not, to re-engineer the human condition across time. Today, we see a kind of immaterial war of ideas which supports material conflicts. As these narratives continue to fight for dominance in our minds, some will

adapt to survive, while others will lose their authority and fall out of favour.

Our stories have defined the world we have created as well as how we view the past, and in order to create a more virtuous future, it is important for us to examine our worldviews, their narrative histories and foundations, and if necessary, redefine them. There is no reliable model available to guide such tasks, but I have suggested what some of the conditions required for narrative re-engineering might be, and some avenues of study which may help. We can look to key cultural texts for characters that represent common ancestors, and appeal to this shared history to heal social divisions. We can find new interpretations of popular stories to promote a shift in social values. We can identify and weaken the authority of stories which undermine the values that keep us together. Looking at our most daunting challenges, we can trace their origins back to a story, and look for creative ways to turn that story into a solution. However, if we expect to re-engineer the human condition through narrative, it must be done carefully. History has shown that the narratives we believe in have tremendous power in governing our behaviour, and this can sometimes have disastrous consequences. Consider how narrative has influenced your life, your culture, your worldview, and how it can be employed to create a truly just world in the future. If Homer is still, today, read as the truest interpreter of humanity's will to violence, who will be, three thousand years from now, read as the truest interpreter of humanity's will to peace?

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