

## SPEAKING IN SIGNS: NARRATIVE AND TRAUMA IN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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*Abstract: Narrative is often seen as the locus of a healing encounter between those who suffer and those who offer pastoral/spiritual care. Both canonical narrative theology, in which the story of Jesus gives meaning to all human stories, and constructive narrative theology, in which redemptive power rests in the human capacity for storytelling itself, can offer chaplains important theological and pastoral insights. But not all who suffer can find or create a narrative to fit them; not all who have experienced trauma can find words to tell their story. To respond to such a crisis in human narrative, we need to enable communication by means of image, symbol and metaphor, or even through learning to preserve a sacred and eloquent silence.*

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### **The Narrative Turn in Theology**

One of the most interesting developments in recent theological thinking has been the extraordinary significance accorded to 'narrative' by conservative, radical and liberal theologians alike. This narrative turn, no doubt born of a post modern scepticism towards abstract, propositional truth claims, is of particular importance for pastoral theologians and practitioners. It is now frequently claimed that the work of storytelling lies at the heart of the healing encounter between those who suffer and those who seek to meet this suffering with the resources of faith.

However, whilst storytelling has assumed a position of great importance there are diverse understandings of the ways in which our stories should be told and how they become redemptive for us. In comprehending these differences it is helpful to make a broad distinction between canonical and constructive forms of narrative theology.

### **Telling God's Story**

Canonical narrative theology, as the name suggests, is based in scriptural accounts of the life of Jesus. Although traditions of prayer and discipleship based upon the imitation of Christ have an ancient genealogy it is the work of Karl Barth which has particularly inspired contemporary narrative theologians such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and, more latterly, scholars connected with radical orthodoxy. Barth regards the story of Jesus as a divinely authorised narrative in which the truth concerning human history is made evident. This story has a scope so great that all human stories can find their meaning within its frame. Canonical narrative theologians imagine the Christian faith as the continuing dynamic outworking of this narrative as believers find their place within the sacred drama. We become Christian, they argue, as we learn to play our own parts in the story of Christ's passion and resurrection.

Stanley Hauerwas is the theologian who has reflected most deeply upon the ethical and pastoral implications of this particular narrative approach. He has attempted to understand its implications for such pressing medical and moral dilemmas as abortion and euthanasia. However it is in his book *Breaking the Silence* (1990), which reflects upon the suffering and death of children, that his thinking is most powerfully articulated.

In this text Hauerwas faces the question as to whether the Christian story allows the tragedy of existence to be voiced in a manner that confesses the unjustifiable agony human beings frequently encounter. 'Can the story be told without the telling of it domesticating the rage we should feel at death?' (1990:38). His conviction that the utter tragedy of the cross enables this to happen allows him to reaffirm that what matters most of all in living with the

unbearable questions of childhood suffering is the fact that these can be comprehended as we sense God's living presence with us in a 'mutual story'. That we have a part to play in this story means that a little child whose life is full of pain is not written out of history but written into God's true story. His or her life becomes important as it is incorporated into the narrative of the community of faith and is thus inscribed into the life of God. There is nothing beyond what the radically inclusive narrative can bear - even the death of a child. 'We believe we share a common story which makes it possible for us to be with one another especially as we die' (1990:148).

### **The Stories of Our Lives**

In canonical narrative theology meaning is to be found as human narratives are incorporated into God's greater story. However, in constructive forms of narrative theology it is in the human capacity for storytelling itself, rather than in a pre-existing grand narrative, that redemptive power is located. In this perspective human beings are seen as story formed creatures whose lives take shape as they begin to employ the resources of narrative traditions to give shape to their own lives. Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher whose work on hermeneutics has become a significant resource for narrative theologians, describes a process of 'enplotment' as the means through which human beings give shape to what would otherwise be 'chaotic, obscure and mute'(1991:115). The operation of plotting synthesises the heterogeneous aspects of existence and organises them into an intelligible whole. Living from birth entangled in narratives we learn to become 'the narrator of our own stories without completely becoming the author of our life' (1991:473).

In another celebration of the constructive power of narrative the sociologist Arthur Frank (1995) reflects upon the discovery of narrative agency particularly in situations where illness threatens to deprive people of autonomy and creative potential. Out of his own experience of cancer and heart disease Frank reflects upon the redemptive work performed by those who gain the strength to narrate lives touched by pain to others. In a society that denies human frailty and vulnerability 'wounded storytellers' witness to others that whilst life events are often brutal and unpredictable a 'story can be told that binds contingent events together in a life

that has moral necessity'(1995:176). Frank uses Christian discourse to describe these 'wounded storytellers'. They are suffering servants who bear the marks of pain and embody 'atonement' for others. Through recovering their own voices they are able to bear testimony on behalf of others who are robbed of speech. 'The wounded storyteller is a moral witness reenchanting a disenchanted world (1995:185).

It is easy to see the pastoral implications of this view of narrative. Making a story that weaves painful circumstances into a wider framework is an act of hope and faith that is of real benefit both to the individual, their families and wider community. Contemporary literature in spiritual and pastoral care encourages pastoral practitioners to see themselves as those who may hear others into speech and assist in the re-patterning of broken and fragmented lives. Towards the end of life storytelling is often portrayed as the most significant action dying people can perform. Whilst others are busy easing painful and distressing symptoms the Chaplain has an evident role to perform in creative listening to the story of a unique human soul.

### **When Stories Fail**

Chaplains can certainly gain important theological and pastoral insights from the work of canonical and constructive narrative theologians. Spiritual caregivers who have the grace to enable people to place their own stories within the embrace of a story that enfolds it are making available the best resources the tradition can offer. Similarly those who have the creativity to recognise and nurture an emerging self-narrative in the broken speech of a sick or distressed person are witnessing to their faith that God is present and active in each human life and that the particularity of personal existence can be the place of divine encounter.

However those who have worked closely with those in pain or grief would probably be the first to admit that for some people there may be no comfort to be found in story telling. Some simply do not find a narrative that can be made to fit the appalling circumstances that confront them. Others have so lost a sense of their own identity that they cannot exercise the creative power necessary to become storytellers. This loss of narrative agency may be a temporary crisis or a more enduring problem. Does it constitute a 'failure' to admit that in some cases

we cannot help others to find the healing and relief that narrative is supposed to bring? Or is it rather the case that we need to examine more carefully the extensive claims that are made about narrative in the contemporary literature of pastoral care in order that we can learn to recognise what resources we have to offer when storytelling fails?

## Trauma and Memory

Recent studies into the effect of trauma have generated significant criticisms of the notion that narrative functions as redemptive practice in cases where the experience of suffering exceeds the conventional means employed to give it voice. In the preface to their edited collection *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (1996) argue that it is not necessarily redemptive to subsume the chaotic/embodied symptoms of trauma into a coherent narrative script. They defy the popular notion that to tell ones story automatically enables healing to take place and argue, 'there is nothing liberating in narrative per se... merely to transfer a story from embodied symptoms into words is not necessarily to exorcize it' (xix).

In the same volume Laurence Kilamyer writes of trauma memories that create a kind of un-story in the personal experience of those who have endured intense suffering. These memories are located on the edge of consciousness 'to be worked around or told in fragments ... There is no narrative of trauma, no memory - only speaking in signs' (175). What are circulated amongst us as narratives from such extreme experiences are often attempts by those who have not been subject to such overwhelming circumstances to repair the social fabric by restoring comprehensibility and communication. Those who have experienced trauma themselves are often alien to coherent accounts of their experiences which others require them to utter.

Having recognised that narrative cannot always restore what has been lost in trauma what resources do we have to draw upon when we encounter those whose experiences have become unspeakable for them? In answering this question I think, we must cultivate an awareness that a crisis in narrative is not merely a personal dilemma for the Chaplain or a pastoral failure. It is rather a window onto problems that unfortunately have not been well aired in theological circles. Theologians have perhaps been too

ready use theodicy to bridge the gaps and fissures in human experience in order to enable us to supply a happy ending to all our stories. The last century's holocausts challenged philosophers, psychologists, poets and politicians to seek to understand what appeared to be a crisis in human narrative caused by excessive and senseless suffering. Theodor Adorno spoke for an entire generation when he testified that after Auschwitz letting suffering speak was the condition of all truth - a statement which immediately provokes the response how can this happen when, as Elaine Scarry maintains, 'pain does not simply resist language it actively destroys it' (1985:4).

Many of those who have engaged with this dilemma have argued that when everyday forms of communication fail it is necessary to speak in new ways. What is needed is not narrative but poesis; images, symbols and metaphors that carry the pain of trauma without committing the blasphemy of trying to represent, comprehend or reconcile the horror in story form. This is what Kilmayer means when he claims there is no narrative of trauma, 'only speaking in signs'.

Elie Weisel, a holocaust survivor whose writing has been important to many Christian theologians, expresses the same sense that on occasions when words failed and stories can not be told that it is our duty to preserve the sacred silence of those who suffer - but in a way that communicates rather than obscures their pain. He puts the issues thus, 'sometimes when no words are possible then silence can become an alternative language. It is possible to have a language of silence. It is about gestures' (2000:35).

Speaking in signs, communicating in the language of silence, preserving the gestures of pain. These are difficult and maddeningly imprecise attempts to describe what it means to let suffering speak. However, I believe they are as important to healthcare chaplains and other pastoral agents as they are to the philosophers and poets who have wrestled with these themes. We encounter those whose lives have been torn apart by trauma in our everyday activities as well as in the pages of books. We must find the resources and the gestures needed both to help those who experience trauma to discover their own strange forms of communication and to testify to this brokenness in human life to others.

In doing so the symbols and rituals of our own tradition will be important to us. For some who experience trauma these will have a resonance and a depth that can become a vehicle for communication. However, in other cases, the conventional forms of religious symbolism will not suffice. We will have to become skilled in the language of silence and adept at offering new symbols that those who suffer may use to mediate their experience. We will need to develop a new sensibility as to how material objects and physical gestures can embody what words may not. We will begin to learn that there are times when it is not right to make connections, supply meanings or resolutions for others. At points all we will be able to do is preserve the sanctity of their silence. As Shoshona Felman has written, our duty is not to give speech to what is unspeakable so that it can address us in narrative form, but rather to grant it 'the power to address us in its silence'. (Laub and Felman, 1992:163).

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