SPIRITUALITY AND THE NARRATIVE

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My narrative identity

Whilst delivering a paper a while ago at an international congress with respect to the narrative pastorate, I realised that I could not address the narrative approach with any sense of authority, unless I personally followed the narrative approach. Therefore I began by telling a story which I remembered from my earliest childhood years. I made myself do that which I had so many times made my companions do. I have the habit to ask people who come to me for pastoral therapy, to share a short story of their childhood years with me at a subsequent meeting. This little story, without our being aware of it, helps us to share much of our identity.

One of the stories, which I remembered, was the story of Daniel and myself and my little cars. I was about three or four years old, but this is the first birthday story that I remember. We lived on a farm on the Highveld and I was the middle child of three; the only boy. We were poor. At that time, my father's dream of being a farmer did not bear any fruit. Since the farm, apparently, required more money than anything else, my father had to continue practising his plumbing trade. Later, as I grew older, our financial situation, although we never became wealthy. Things did go well enough, which enabled my father to pay for my sisters and my studies. Be that as it may, at that early stage we were still very poor and therefore I was ecstatic when I received my birthday present: a few plastic-cars, packed in a long box, one after the other.

My first reaction was to show this wonderful birthday present to my best friend. He was Daniel, a black boy who lived and worked with his parents on the farm. Everyday we played together. I found him in the outbuilding and we sat down in order to look at the cars. He was slightly older than I was and sat on a bench, whilst I sat on the floor in front of him. One by one the cars were taken out and we stared at them in wonder. Eventually he took the two

nicest cars and nonchalantly pushed them backwards underneath his bench, almost as if to say that he now considered these two to be his! I do not remember the precise details of what happened next. How I managed it, I do not know, but I retrieved my cars. After all, I was the boss's child, and there was no way that Daniel could take my birthday present.

I do not even want to attempt to interpret this story. As my "therapist", it is your task. The initial audience at the international congress saw much in terms of black-white relationships and role expectations. I am re-telling this story, however, for the purpose of arriving at the conclusion of the congress-story. One of the participants asked a question at the end of my presentation which I could not immediately answer and to which I have subsequently given much thought. He asked me to explain my interest in the narrative approach on the basis of my story (not only this story, but my whole life-story).

After much thought, I made an attempt. My story, as for most (all) people in South Africa, is an apartheid story. It is a story, which has shamed me, although it is a story that is more complex than acknowledged by my foreign listeners. Through experience, I know what it means to encounter a "narrative therapist" - someone who truly listens to my story.

To be able to tell a story to someone who genuinely listens with interest is like feeling soft salve on the wounds of the past. The apartheid story is a story of degradation. It is a story of *knowing* and *supremacy, which* eventually backfired. We who thought that we had all the answers and looked down on the rest of the world, eventually had to feel what it was like to be reproached as the scum of the earth. I found myself in many situations where I attempted to give answers, and whilst I was speaking, I became less convinced. Through conversations with interested foreigners, I realised that I knew fewer and fewer of the answers. In the process of telling the story, I discovered that my story made less and less sense. As time passed, reframing took place. A story which was told with conviction in order to persuade the listeners to different insights, now made way for a story of *shame*, which needed to be confessed. This was a painful process, but simultaneously a freeing process. In my own apartheid's story, I experienced with the passing of time, my own progress from "storytelling" to "story making". By telling the story to sympathetic, though critical listeners, I was enabled to tell a new story regarding my apartheid past, which allowed me to work towards a better future.

As a young minister, I was more in contact with my own people, rather than with members of the black community or even the non-Afrikaans community. I became a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond and I remember well how in many conversations I vehemently defended the cause of the Afrikaner and the moral justifiability of apartheid. After I was

appointed as pastor to students in 1978 at the Universiteitsoord-congregation in Pretoria, a gradual change took place. Obviously, I was exposed to more young and fresh thinking and began to disassociate myself gradually from conservative, ideological Afrikaner thought. I remember accompanying a group of students to Soweto during one winter holiday, and the wretched living conditions of the people deeply impacted me.

Today, when I think back, I am ashamed that I did not come to other insights sooner than I did. In 1997, when I, along with a group of ministers, co-signed an open letter, which we submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I had exactly this reluctance and blindness in mind. I had wasted valuable years as a pastor to students and did not do enough to promote a social-ethical conscience within young Afrikaners.

Soon after I had been appointed as a lecturer in the Theological Faculty of the Dutch Reformed Church at the University of Pretoria in 1990, I had opportunity to attend a consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, along with a number of lecturers from Stellenbosch and Pretoria. We entered into dialogue with a delegation from the All Africa Council of Churches. I was greatly impressed by their intellectualism, genuine spirituality, and general attitude towards us. This happened before Mandela was freed. We were still not able to obtain visas for Kenya, and therefore special arrangements had to be made to allow us to enter the country.

During this visit to Kenya, I developed for the first time a deeply felt need to apologise for my involvement with the apartheid structures. I had had already realised intellectually that we had made mistakes and that change had to happen. As a member of a group of Christians in a strange country, this became an emotional confession, which I expressed in a group meeting. I believe that this was a watershed moment in my attitude to and view of the situation in our country.

Afterwards, I, along with a number of my colleagues, began to speak and preach differently. I wholeheartedly aligned myself with renewing thought and when I attended synods and meetings, I defended consequent non-racial and inclusive positions. I pleaded that the Dutch Reformed Church needed to make a full confession of its part in the apartheid structure, and that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission should serve as the forum for this. I used more than one of my columns (Church and Media) in “Die Kerkbode” to state this point. I was deeply disappointed when the General Synod Commission declined to take such a decision, and therefore I decided to sign the open letter, which was circulating amongst ministers. In this way I expressed my deeply felt need to confess my guilt for my part of the apartheids-ideology. During this period (1997), and after years of inactivity, I allowed my

membership of the Afrikaner Broederbond to lapse. I do not have guilt feelings regarding my involvement with the Bond. Sometimes, it was precisely in these circles that I discovered some of the most liberal thinking. As a servant of the gospel, it slowly became clearer to me that it was no longer appropriate for me to associate myself so strongly with the Afrikaner-establishment.

For too many years I had found myself in the role of boss. Naturally, the development of a political system such as apartheid is a complex issue. Many factors inform it over many generations. My friend, Daniel and I were also products of social patterns, which had been established a long time ago. I was a part of the "haves" and he a part of the "have-nots", and it was neither our fault that it was so. I received cars for my birthday and could only desire them and make a futile attempt to have a part of them. It was neither's fault that we were born into the roles of "boss' and "servant". However, I can never plead my innocence to the charge that for too long I was insensitive to the position in which he and his group found themselves. I too easily accepted my privileged position as being obvious, and did not seek to empathise with them. Therefore I am ashamed, and once again would like to confess my guilt for my part of an inequitable and unjust situation.

For a long time I consoled myself with the idea that I have always had a good relationship with black people. The comradeship that I, as a boy on a farm, had with Daniel and other black people, always stayed with me. My parents also had an interest in mission, and did much, not only to evangelise the people on the farm, but also to meet them in their miserable circumstances. For example, my father built a school on the farm, which served the whole neighbourhood, and my mother even started basic education. Often I lead worship services on Sunday afternoons in the same school. Therefore it was a virtually logical step for me to involve myself in student-mission organisations at university and later became the chairperson of the "KJV-Indiersending".

Despite all my involvement with and good attitude towards black people, for years I never questioned the social-political system. I never got as far as to translate the gospel into social-ethical terms. My spirituality focused far too much on personal piety. For too long I was blind to the terrifying powerlessness and hopelessness that formed the lot of so many people who lived and worked in South Africa. I feel guilty about that.

This is why the narrative approach attracted me. My deep need to tell my story of guilt and shame is facilitated by it. It helped me to find my identity anew. When you work with stories, you do not need only to work with good, success stories. By means of the narrative

approach we develop respect for each other's stories, and therefore we may also bring our stories of skeletons of guilt out of the cupboard.

By telling this part of my story (I could have chosen other angles to my story), I am trying to find identity for a white, male Afrikaner in South Africa. In this way I also defend my choice of the narrative approach as a potential intercultural approach. In other publications I have already argued that the narrative approach lends itself admirably to dialogue in an intercultural context. (11). The reader will understand from my story why it is important for me to develop theories of dialogue which are not exclusively western orientated. The model, which will eventually be developed in this book, must also be useful in a variety of cultural contexts. To this end I present an intercultural case study in Chapter 3, and have also chosen a fable out of African-culture to serve as metaphor for the whole book.

Similar to most, I often have paradoxical experiences and emotions regarding Africa. I can have childlike enthusiasm for *ubuntu* that approach to life, which makes Africa a friendly and human place, a continent where relationships receive priority to business. The next moment, I can become so worried and unhappy over the lack of purpose and effectiveness. Despite all this, I again and again make a decision for Africa. My heart resonates with the title and contents of Tienie Swanepoel's book, *My hart wil Afrika.* This is the way I would like to practise my practical theology and pastoral work: With my eyes focused on South Africa and Africa.

Story and identity

Life is a journey. We journey both separately and collectively. We come from somewhere and we are on our way to somewhere. We have a past and a future and with our stories we try to link these two - our past and our future - with each other.

I gave these matters much thought and have been largely led by H R Niebuhr's profound statement:

The past and the future are not the no-longer and the not-yet; they are extensions of the present. The are the still-present and the already-present…. (2)

In the stories we tell, the future becomes the already-present and the past becomes the still-present. The past and the future combine to form a suspenseful and powerful NOW. The stories that are remembered and the stories that are expected inform the present reality.

Sharing a story from my past is tantamount to being an attempt to construct my future. We construct our lives with stories. The stories stored in our memories form the framework of our attempts to discover meaning in life. It also aids our approach to the future. Stories are therefore not merely ways to describe our lives. They are much more than simple descriptions. Our stories give form to our lives. With such form we organise our lives and try to provide handholds, which will help us step-by-step to cross the unstable rope-bridge towards our future.

At the occasion of my mother's recent death, we, her children, gathered around her deathbed, and told the story again, mainly for ourselves, but later to others. We told the story of her suffering and how terrible it was to witness her struggle for breath. We also told the story of the gratitude that she expressed right to the end for the smallest things that was done for her, which helped to preserve her dignity. By telling these stories we not only witnessed to the type of person our mother was and to the way she died. We were re-organising our lives. One of the coping tools, which we constructed for ourselves, is that no matter what happens, a person must maintain their dignity. By talking about her death, we attempted to give form to our own life stories, which would lead to the day we exhale our last breath.

The narrative approach has made the discovery that people do not tell stories only for interest's sake or for entertainment, but that life's grain is exposed through these stories. This is our way of thinking, doing and decision-making. Each story told, represents a struggle in the process of thinking, doing and decision-making. (3). Through our stories we not only discover identity, but also build identity. Within each story there is a tension between what is experienced in the present on the one hand, and the past and the future on the other. This is why the narrative approach is more than the interesting truth that people enjoy stories and enjoy telling stories. It concerns the discovery that stories are fundamental to being human. Theodore Sarbin, who published many writings regarding this theme, calls this the "root metaphor" which is used to interpret and understand humanity. (4).

A distinction must be drawn between pure or raw experience and interpreted experience. A person cannot do much with experience alone. Experience only becomes useful if we can succeed to turn it into a story form. We therefore organise our experiences into stories.

Every new sensation or stimulus is reformulated into a story. In this we make progress and life becomes a journey, since we take past experiences, organise them into a story, which then in turn becomes a map of the unknown territory that lies ahead.

Jean-Paul Sarte's words describe the way our stories serve both as spectacles through which we view our experiences and the instruments, which give form to our lives:

This is what fools people: Humans are always tellers of tales, we live surrounded by our stories and the stories of others, we see everything that happens to us through these stories; and we try to live our lives as if we were telling a story. (6).

Let me say it again: The point of departure and the basis of the narrative approach is that a unity exists between the past, the present, and the future, and simultaneous contains an inherent tension. We try to express and work with both the unity and tension between past, present, and future through the telling of our stories. A narrative approach to dialogue and therapy is about mining these stories, continuously being told by people, so that eventually they can be reformulated into stories that would an give new meaning and impetus to life.

This unity of human existence, which includes the past, present, and future, has been neglected in the past by most behavioural and social sciences. The well-known psychoanalytical models are based on a personality theory, which seeks to explain human behaviour as a result of suppressed sexual and aggressive instincts, which have its roots in the distant past. The point of departure is that there are things somewhere in the past, which need to be "treated", and then the individual is supposed to function optimally. Other theories, including theories of family therapy, are more inclined to emphasise the immediate and functionality. The future and the unity between future, present and past, still does not receive adequate emphasis.

The meaning of the future and the unity of the human story, which encompasses the whole "journey", is a discovery, which offers wonderful possibilities for better understanding human, living. Walter Brueggemann described the Christian life as "telling a past and dreaming a future" (7). This also suffices as a description of our whole existence. Our stories contain elements of telling and dreaming. The greater the gap between the "telling" and the "dreaming" becomes, the more the tension will increase, and the more the likelihood of pathological behaviour. On the other hand, where harmony exists between yesterday, today

and tomorrow, there will be integrity, wholeness and maturity - the basic ingredients of spirituality.

the narrative understanding of spirituality