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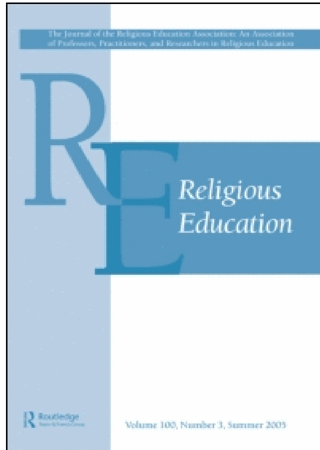

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Storytelling as a Means of Peacemaking: A Case Study of Christian Education in Africa

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STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF PEACEMAKING: A CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This article explores how storytelling can help create a space for transformational learning. In particular it looks at the role of storytelling in education for peace in Africa. It also touches on related issues, including the role of historic peace churches, the role of women, and the role of faith convictions, in the process of moving from violence to peace with justice. The case study for the essay is the *Watu Wa Amani* (People of Peace) conference held in Nairobi in 2004.

WATU WA AMANI (PEOPLE OF PEACE)

Storytelling was central to the *Watu Wa Amani* (People of Peace) conference. Representatives from historic peace churches around the world came to the conference, three-fourths from countries in Africa. They came to hear why people make war and do violence. They came to learn how to make peace and do justice. Largely they came to tell and hear stories.

Cecile Nyiramana, a Quaker from Rwanda, told how Hutu militias slaughtered nearly a million Tutsis in 100 days; how her husband afterward wound up in prison; and how she is now working to bring about peace between the wives of prisoners and the wives of men who incarcerated them.

Siaka Traore, a Mennonite from Burkina Faso, told the story of what happened after the assassination of their president and impending civil war. The new president appointed a Committee of Elders (*College de Sages*), which included religious leaders of different faiths. The elders gave their verdict: victims of injustice should receive monetary compensation, and the president should address the nation during a National Day of Pardon. The president did so, expressing remorse for

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ways the government had sponsored torture and other crimes against its citizens, and war was averted.

Cathy Mputu and Pascal Kalungu, Mennonites from the Democratic Republic of Congo, told what happened after civil war did break out in their country. In 1991 a group of elite paratroopers, who had not received their back pay, began pillaging the capital city. Other troops did the same thing, touching off a general spree of looting and violence. The church where Mputu and Kalungu are members responded by teaching people that Christians do not take part in such looting. They told the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, inspiring some church members to return property they had pillaged.

Africans at the *Watu Wa Amani* conference listened to these and many other stories, in a context of daily Christian singing, praying and Bible reading. Westerners at the conference listened and wondered how Western influence could be relevant to promoting peace in Africa, given the history of colonialism.

It is hard to measure the achievement of the conference by statistical results, but if it is viewed as a qualitative case study, we may make the claim that storytelling became a vehicle for forming a community of common values at the conference and a network of relationships that continued thereafter.[1] Further, if violence enslaves, then an open space for storytelling can free people to form new identities, recall old wisdom, and transform conflict by imagining alternate endings to familiar patterns. Here "story" becomes not just talk that evades action, but instead a kind of performative action, even sacramental in the sense it manifests the new reality of which it speaks. We are not claiming that storytelling is the sum of education, or that education alone can bring peace and justice. Yet this article aims to explore the value of education based in storytelling.

THE ROLE OF HISTORIC PEACE CHURCHES

Friends, Mennonites, Brethren and other interested groups met in 1935 to consider their "absolute opposition to war." Previously called "pacifist churches," they changed their name to "historic peace churches," to signal to the U.S. government that their opposition to

[1]A fuller account of the *Watu Wa Amani* conference is given in the forthcoming book *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories of African Peacemakers*, Donald E. Miller, Scott Holland, Lon Fendall, and Dean Johnson, editors (Herald Press, Cascadia Press and the World Council of Churches).

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war had historic roots; it did not just emerge at the time of a draft. The change did help these churches make this case at the start of World War II.

After that war, historic peace churches participated in forming the World Council of Churches in 1948, influencing its declaration that "War is contrary to the will of God."

In 1968, after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the WCC adopted a Program to Combat Racism, which in time devoted energy to opposing South African apartheid. Following the fall of apartheid, the WCC adopted another program, the Decade to Overcome Violence. The *Watu Wa Amani* conference was part of this program, held in Nairobi in light of the unprecedented violence in Africa in the past half century, and also because historic peace churches have a growing membership there. There are more Quakers in Kenya, more Brethren in Nigeria, and more Mennonites in the Democratic Republic of the Congo than in the United States.

Westerners who helped organize this conference faced the question: after the era of colonialism has inserted national boundaries and incited tribal conflict, can a path be found that avoids neo-colonial manipulation on the one side and abdication of responsibility on the other? Coercion and manipulation can occur even when intentions are benign, but a posture of blank isolation in the face of obvious need manifests both a weak conscience and a weak ecclesiology.

This moral dilemma parallels an educational dilemma. In regard to "liberation," which includes freedom from violence and injustice, Paolo Freire has argued persuasively that the initiative for liberation must come from the oppressed rather than the oppressor, for several reasons. First, liberation entails taking initiative, and almost by definition initiative cannot be passively received. Second, any effort of the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed is likely to become paternalistic or false charity. Third, the psychological dynamics of symbiosis between the two groups are too destructive to be redeemed. For example, the oppressed may feel ambivalence toward the oppressors, resenting but secretly admiring them; often the oppressed equate liberation with attaining the lifestyle of the oppressor.

Freire's position is nuanced but does not completely address a problem of liberation movements, which Paul Lehman described well when he noted that revolutions devour their children. History gives examples of how when oppressed groups take initiative their unrepressed anger can unleash violence that equals or sometimes exceeds the original oppression. The recent genocide in Rwanda probably evinces this

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dynamic, since the Hutus saw the Tutsis as collaborating with colonial oppression. The interconnection of oppression, revolution, and violence is one reason why peace and justice can seem so elusive.

While Western planners of the conference did not know how to resolve all these dilemmas, they sought to make a non-coercive positive contribution by working with African church leaders. It was decided that the content of the conference should emphasize storytelling, which is consistent with indigenous ways of conferring. General Secretary of the WCC, Samuel Kobia of Kenya, notes that for Africans storytelling has been essential to creating a "communitarian ethic" and "communitarian spirit" (2003, 95–6).

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACEMAKING

One way Westerners gave influence was by encouraging churches to send an equal number of men and women delegates, a move that was neither resisted nor resented. Women have often been leaders in peacemaking in Africa. If, according to the dynamics of oppression, initiative for true liberation comes from the oppressed; and if, according to the dynamics of much Christian theology, those who suffer can intercede before God for healing and justice, then both these factors speak to the importance of women's voices.

Women suffer from violence, when they are victims of rape or mutilation, or when they become widows who must care for families on their own, or in numerous other ways. Men suffer in some similar and different ways, but disproportionately violence disempowers women.[2]

People at *Watu Wa Amani* heard the story of a young woman whose older husband attacked her because he blamed her for his sexual difficulties. In anger he struck her with a machete, aiming to decapitate her. He missed, but "she has a horizontal scar from the middle of the back of her head, through her right ear and onto her right cheek" (David Niyonzima, speaking at the conference). She nearly died, yet survived after a long stay in hospital. During her first session at a trauma healing center, she sat and cried, unable to speak. With support and encouragement, over time she began to recall and talk

[2]"Transforming Power" was the theme of a 1996 pan-African conference that discussed both power that transforms and power that needs transforming because it is abusive. "At the center of this discussion," notes Kobia, "is violence against women and girl children, a topic which has received minimal attention by many churches in Africa" (2003, 141).

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of what happened. Finally she was able to tell her story to women in a trauma workshop, and since has assumed a leadership role in such workshops, empowering both her and other women.

The home is often the site of violence against women, but it can also be the domain where women's leadership is respected. Certainly children can first learn how to respond to conflict from the women who care for them. "Peace begins in the home," notes Neddy Jyidei, a Kenyan farmer and homemaker. She says peace spreads from the human heart to the family home to the village to the land. Women can also play a crucial role in bringing peace from house to house. When a strange man arrives at a home, he is eyed with suspicion, and the potential alcoholic or thief is chased away. But a woman will more likely be welcomed as one who can help with the children or housework.

Nora Musundi of Kenya spoke of women taking leadership after ethnic clashes in 1991. Many people were killed and houses burned. Women in her prayer group responded by caring for refugees who came to their village; eventually they built a community health center. She and other women in her prayer group tried to address the underlying causes of violence by training unschooled youth in skills such as tailoring and carpentry, offering counseling to people, and caring for HIV/AIDS victims.

Nora's story comprises a narrative in which she and the prayer group are protagonists, but also, in her telling of it, the protagonist was God. She saw herself acting continually in relation to Jesus Christ, and saw events as occurring in response to prayer. Without minimizing human effort, this vantagepoint made her story communal church property.

THE ROLE OF FAITH CONVICTIONS IN PEACEMAKING

Listeners at *Watu Wa Amani* heard some stories of peacemaking in the immediate sense of averting impending violence. Filibus Kumba Gwama, president of EYN (Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria) Brethren in Nigeria, gave an example of transforming conflict. When in 1979 a new EYN church building was erected in Chinene, northeastern Nigeria, some Muslims grew concerned that the church was moving too close to the village center. They destroyed the church building. Furious at the damage and the insult, two thousand Christian men from the area gathered the next day to take revenge.

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At their meeting, Pastor Gwama asked, "What will happen after we go to war? Probably one person will be killed among us and maybe one among the Muslims. How can we compare two lives with the building? The building was not yet roofed. Even if it was roofed, which of them will be of more value: the lives that we are going to lose or the building?" Hesitantly the crowd agreed that the lives were of more value than the building. Pastor Gwama concluded that EYN Brethren believe it is often possible to prevent bloodshed when there is a crisis.

The stories at *Watu Wa Amani* were not just about making peace, whether by averting impending violence or addressing its systemic causes. Many stories told of violence suffered and injustice not remedied. These were not "success" stories in any simple sense. Here peacemaking meant simply truth-telling, and success lay in the refusal to allow violence to have the last word. The truth commissions in South Africa were not designed to deal with guilt, punishment, and restitution in an individualized sense. Rather, telling and listening to personal stories was a way to move toward communal healing.

Thus David Niyonzima told people at *Watu Wa Amani* how the Quakers in Rwanda and Burundi have supported the plan to set up Gacaca courts—open sessions within local villages where the truth of what happened is plain for all to hear. In Rwanda in 1994, close to a million people were killed in a span of 100 days, while most of the world looked the other way. The burden of guilt is too immense for any criminal justice system to contemplate. There were ancient animosities between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples. There were colonial powers that forced national boundaries placing them together. There were men wielding machetes, and there was a world averting its eyes.

With so much terribly wrong, there can be the natural, even moral sense that someone must pay. Certainly there can be no easy way to "forgive and forget." In this light, it may be possible to understand better how many Africans in historic peace churches hear the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. God in Christ absorbs the guilt. God in Christ returns evil with good, epitomizing enemy love. God in Christ overcomes the violent death-dealing forces, commencing a new reign of justice. While some Western theologians may here construe three different "doctrines of atonement"—and pit one against the others—many listeners in Africa will hear instead a comprehensive narrative of God's total participation in creation. If horrible wrongdoing cannot simply be dismissed, but someone must pay for it, and if God in Christ volunteers to do so, how are we to hear this moral reckoning? If it sounds too juridical or too much like divine child abuse,

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is that because some Western listeners are already thinking in these individualized juridical and psychological categories?

We could continue this theological discussion, but there is a point to be made about storytelling—which is that stories often have more than one point. Whether we are hearing the story of one's life or an African version of the Christian story, listening well means indwelling the space the story circumscribes. By indwelling we may come to understand the inner logic, which often is not linear.

STORYTELLING AND CREATING SPACE (FIVE FACTORS)

One reason why storytelling can be valuable for peacemaking is that it *creates a familiar learning space*. Growing up in Africa, children traditionally hear stories from their elders. More than fifty years later, an adult can remember a story told in childhood; for example: Ten girls went into the woods to gather fruit from a tree. Five were able to climb the tree, five stayed on the ground to put the fruit into baskets. One girl began to eat the fruit she was picking. She ate so much and her stomach grew so full, she could not climb down from the tree. Come, let's go home, the nine girls called to her when they were ready to leave. No, you go on without me, she replied. I will follow later. That night, the woods grew dark, and a wild animal came to the tree. What are you doing up there?, the wild animal asked the girl. I'm waiting to come down, the girl replied. But when she came down, the wild animal ate her.

A story such as this one from Kenya has many facets. On a cognitive level it teaches about counting and being aware of time. It instructs that one must take care when going into the woods to find firewood or pick fruit, and it is good to stick together. The story implies something about the virtue of industry and the vice of gluttony. It appeals to the imagination, here in frightening ways, but the fear is not unrealistic.

Customarily girls and boys in Kenya hear their first stories from women, often their grandmothers or other older women. In many tribes boys are circumcised in adolescence, to mark their passage to manhood. The ritual takes place away from home, and it entails listening to stories from men about what it means to become a man. Storytelling is a time-honored way of teaching that quickens the imagination and conveys its moral message indirectly, often the most effective way.

A second reason why storytelling can promote peacemaking is that it *creates a safe space*. This safety is at once literal, metaphorical,

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and psychological. The psychologist Carl Rogers influenced people to see the importance of safe space to resolve personal conflicts in a therapeutic setting, and such safety may be equally valuable for groups of people seeking to resolve societal conflict.

Robert Ardrey's (1996) book, *The Territorial Imperative*, describes a naturalist's effort to mate two leopards. The male leopard struck and killed the female, because she got into his territory. Space was more important than mating. Humans too fight over space, especially when there is a sense of ownership, or of sacredness, or of necessity because of scarce water or fertile land. When literal space has become the site of hostility, a space of safety becomes all the more vital. When the four tribes that comprise the EYN church met together at *Watu Wa Amani*, past conflict between tribes became subordinate to hearing one another's stories and recognizing their common Christian story. The storytelling did not erase the conflict or produce more water-rich land, but it did establish as starting places a premise of safety and an assumption of sharing. (By contrast, "peace talks" often start with a premise of fear and an assumption of competition.)

Thus a third and related reason why storytelling can help teach peace is that it often *creates a communal space*. People of the same faith may have distinct ideas or competing doctrines that cause division. Storytelling can be a way to way to return to a common narrative, without being dismissive about differences. Even when people have different faiths or different metanarratives, they may be able to come together to share their stories, which is not the same as everyone sharing the same story. People do not need to abandon their own narrative to hear another. In a communal setting, however, storytellers may more readily perceived how their own narratives have been used to promote or justify violence. A fitting image of this communal space may be people standing on home ground, but at the border where they can talk to neighbors.

Fourth, storytelling *creates an empowering space*. Violence was disempowering for the woman whose husband nearly killed her with a machete; so too the silence and isolation that followed. But when she was able to tell her story, there was newfound power. There was healing in coming from the isolation of suffering into community. Partly this power may be due to the dynamics of human development. The free flow of grammatical speech leads children to enjoy new confidence, and even what Piaget called the omnipotence of intelligence. The ability to construct the world linguistically empowers people to initiate change.

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A fifth, again related, reason why *storytelling* is valuable for education is that it often *creates an imaginative space*, where the mind is more free to see alternate endings to familiar but destructive patterns. Howard Gardner, in *Therapeutic Communication with Children*, advocates the use of broken narration in therapy, to help children hear and experience alternate endings to their life stories. Margaret Krych (1988), in *Teaching the Gospel Today*, explains the value of narrative as a teaching method. She constructs broken narrative versions of Biblical stories. The point at which the narration breaks is the point where self-involvement begins; it is where existential conflicts and questions arise. The teacher will relate a story to children, then ask, "What do you think will happen next?" For example, in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, the narration can stop at the moment when Jesus is approaching the tree Zacchaeus has climbed; knowing that Zacchaeus has done bad things, the children will be asked: What do you think Jesus is going to do? What will he say to Zacchaeus? A child may respond: Jesus is going to tell Zacchaeus that he is bad, and he shouldn't climb that tree, and he should go away. But the biblical ending is different. Jesus befriends Zacchaeus and shares a meal with him. The different ending helps children to imagine different endings to their own life stories.

In the context of teaching children, Krych explores convergences between storytelling and Paul Tillich's existential theology. The story such as the one of Jesus and Zacchaeus enable her as a Lutheran to teach children justification by faith, at the very age when society is teaching them justification by works. In a different but compatible manner, Samuel Kobia (2004) looks at Africa through an interpretative lens that includes existential theology and an emphasis on storytelling. The title and content of his book *The Courage to Hope* was influenced by Paul Tillich's (2000) *The Courage to Be*.

"The listening spirit," Kobia writes, "will enable Africa to discern messages of hope even through walls of hopelessness" (2003, 94). To some extent the choice between hope and hopelessness can hinge upon the story people choose to construct from the cloth of given "facts." Take economic facts, for example. Kobia agrees with the accepted opinion that "Africans are worse off economically today than they were at independence" (2003, 143). He sums up the situation: "After two decades of development work in Africa, the average African household has less food at the table (or rather, on the mat), fewer and poorer quality health services, less to spend on the education of children, no rural agricultural extension

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services and lower value for their cash crop. One could go on and on" (145).

What story emerges from these facts? Here Kobia disagrees sharply with an article in *The Economist* describing Africa as "The Hopeless Continent" (May 2000). The article points to Sierra Leone as symbolizing failure and despair. "It is not the 'facts' that concern us so much as the spirit of the article," he asserts. A different spirit can be heard in the story told by Zainab Bangura, a Sierra Leonian woman who directs the country's leading NGO. She speaks of "how God must have had hope for us when he gave us the diamonds, gold, titanium, iron, cocoa, coffee, ginger and palm oil" (145). In view of the same facts, one story sees only scarcity, while the other sees abundance, because it looks at the people in relation to the land, and the land in relation to God.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Some religious educators may conclude that *Watu Wa Amani* is a story about education and the value of critical correlation. In this interpretation, the power for transformation came from bringing participants' stories into correlation or dialogue with the Christian Story (to use Thomas Groome's helpful language).

This interpretation is probably partly correct. People at *Watu Wa Amani* told their stories in light of the Christian Story, and they heard the Christian Story afresh in light of the contemporary stories they shared. They observed the cultural differences (and similarities) depicted in their different stories. They examined scriptural accounts of violence and peacemaking. They engaged in daily theological reflection. Such activities had the potential to heighten critical awareness.

Yet two considerations must qualify this reading of the event. First, organizers of the conference were guided more by the broad notion of creating space than by a specific strategy based on narrative theory (critical correlational or otherwise). The same space that empowered some people to tell stories enabled others to give sermons or speeches, and these offerings did not violate the "curriculum" of the conference. Just as the stories were not required to teach a master moral truth, so these other contributions were not required to fit a master theory about narrative and education. Given the invitation to tell stories, most people did so, because they found it a familiar way to communicate. For their part, the organizers or "teachers" at the conference encouraged

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people to hear each story on its own terms. Yet this integrity did not mean isolation. The stories were not told in a vacuum, but within a worshiping community.

This point leads to a second consideration. Narrative theories and strategies can be invaluable for engendering critical consciousness; but is critical reflection enough to transcend entrenched patterns of violence and destruction? Sometimes it may be, but often it is not, and the same goes for other educational aims. We said that storytelling was central to the conference, but now it needs to be stressed that the sense of a *worshiping community* was central to storytelling—this was the larger frame of reference. "Community" meant people experienced care, nurture, and support from others. For people who have been traumatized by violence such community is usually an essential precondition for being able to speak their stories. The community's ability to listen precedes the person's ability to speak. Meanwhile "worshiping" meant people heard and told stories with openness to the presence and power of God. Here heightened consciousness is not just an ability to reflect critically upon a situation, but an awareness of God being in the thick of it.

Clearly, therefore, storytelling is not an autonomous technique. It does not mechanically create the space for teaching and learning just described. Obviously the content of a story matters quite a bit, and the way it is told, and the community that listens. In this article we have not attempted to explain in precise structural terms how stories of personal experience relate to stories of communal memory, or how both relate to the Story (and stories) of the Christian gospel. Nor have we tried to say in precise theological terms how the Christian story relates to the stories of other religions, although we have emphasized the importance of creating communal space.

In sum, the *Watu Wa Amani* conference is a case study that demonstrated, at least to its participants, the valuable role of storytelling in education for peace with justice. Sharing stories was one way to share power and draw strength from one another. Delegates offered compelling narratives that depicted the horrors of violence, but also creative examples of conflict transformation. Clearly the narrators shaped their stories in relation to the Christian biblical narrative, and listeners heard them in that light. Less clear is how to learn peace with those whose larger narrative for life is not Christian, or those whose Christian narrative condones violent means, or those who use religious language to mask violent ends.

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These issues complicate, but do not negate, the value of storytelling in learning peace. In the ongoing story of the human spirit's desire to teach peace, those who compose future chapters will do well not to portray any people (even the "violent" ones just named) simply as enemies to be erased, but rather to construct a narrative in which all peoples can eventually be embraced. This is not the same thing as agreeing with all convictions, but rather the aim is to create space in which all parties can tell their stories from a convictional standpoint, somehow believing that, in and beyond these human efforts, the One who "knows the end from the beginning," will compose a final chapter in which peace with justice can prevail.

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