

What is Storytelling?

A Discussion Paper

by

The Healing Through Remembering Storytelling sub group

*Paper presented at the Storytelling as the Vehicle? Conference
Dunadry Hotel, Dunadry, 29 November 2005*

This paper was produced by the Storytelling sub group of Healing Through Remembering. The paper aims to take you through the story of the sub group, that is how we came about, the activities we are engaged in and the point we have reached in our work.

Healing Through Remembering (HTR)¹ is an extensive cross-community project made up of individual members holding different political perspectives. We have come together over the last five years to focus on the issue of how to deal with the past relating to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. The Project carried out an extensive consultation in 2001/2002 which asked individuals, organisations and communities the question: “How should people remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland and in so doing, individually and collectively, contribute to the healing of the wounds of society?”.

In this original consultation storytelling was the form of remembering most often suggested to the project. Many felt that it was important to record the stories of individuals’ experiences of the conflict as an historical resource and a way of enabling society to examine the wealth of meanings and learning connected to the conflict. It was also suggested that the person telling their story, if listened empathically to, could experience a degree of healing. Equally, it was recognised that recounting painful experiences of the past could, in the words of several contributors ‘reopen old wounds’. Some submissions expressed concern that, unless a wide range of accounts are recorded and archived, a singular, exclusive narrative of the conflict will become dominant over time. This was particularly important to people who felt their experience of the conflict had been ignored.

These varied responses represent a range of opinion about what storytelling is, what its purpose is and what value it has. Some people emphasise healing and acceptance, while others focus on learning and explanation.

In June 2002 the Board published its findings in the form of the Healing Through Remembering Report (see Healing Through Remembering, 2002). The Board made six recommendations.² One of these recommended establishing a storytelling process known as ‘Testimony’. Such a process would aim to collect stories and narratives from all who wish to tell of their experiences of the conflict in and about Northern

¹ For more information see <http://www.healingthroughremembering.org>

² Collective Storytelling and Archiving Process, Day of Reflection, Living Memorial Museum, Acknowledgement, Network of Commemoration and Remembrance Projects and an Healing Through Remembering Initiative.

Ireland. These stories—collected by community groups and those already undertaking this type of work, through a flexible but standard method—would form part of an archive housing the stories of the past and serving as a vehicle to learn lessons for the future.

To advance this recommendation, and the others, the Healing Through Remembering Initiative was formally established in 2003. In 2004 the Initiative formed sub groups to carry out the specific work of furthering the recommendations. These sub groups—like the original Board that carried out the first consultation—are made up of a wide range of individuals with different perspectives. The Storytelling sub group is one of five sub-groups formed.³ The group started its work in August 2004. In subsequent months, the membership of the group was expanded and met under an interim chair from the original HTR Board.⁴ In April 2005, a Chair and vice-Chair were appointed.

Exploring the recommendation

Although the HTR recommendation refers to one standard process of storytelling there is a more complex underlying reality. As noted above, the HTR report itself contains a number of different ideas about what storytelling is and the purpose of it. One understanding gives emphasis to storytelling as experience or expression with possible therapeutic benefits. Another emphasises historical record, explanation and knowledge with benefits for political transformation. This spectrum of understanding about what storytelling is and its value has continued into the discussions of the Storytelling sub group. This is also evident in wider debates.

Many members of the sub group are practitioners and facilitators in the field of storytelling and as we began to share our experience we recognised the variety of methods and approaches being used. This is apparent in the range of names that people give to their work. These include: remembering, sharing stories, commemoration, oral history, personal stories, truth telling, narratives and testimonies. These terms also express the range of motives and outcomes people bring to the project of storytelling. This dialogue about different kinds of storytelling convinced us that a piece of research looking at all the current storytelling initiatives was necessary.

The audit

It was agreed therefore to commission an audit of current and previous storytelling initiatives on behalf of the Storytelling sub group. Following a tendering process Gráinne Kelly was appointed to carry out the audit. The first version of the audit was published and launched in October 2005 (Healing Through Remembering, 2005).

³ The other four sub groups address issues relating to a Living Memorial Museum, a Day of Reflection, a Network of Commemoration and Remembering Projects and Acknowledgement and Truth Recovery.

⁴ Olive Bell, Jo Dover, Jacinta de Paor, Stephen Gargan, Harold Good, Claire Hackett (Vice-Chair), Maureen Hetherington (Chair), Gráinne Kelly, Alistair Little, Richard Moore, Mary McAnulty, Ann McKenny, Aoine McMahon, Steve Nelson, Marie-Therese O Hagan, Martin Snoddon and Marion Weir.

The main part of the audit comprises of a directory of some thirty storytelling projects with a detailed profile of each. The audit also contains a wide-ranging discussion on storytelling and a list of recommendations.

The recommendations provide an agenda of work for the Storytelling sub group to pursue and encompass issues such as networking, training, archiving and ethical standards. The recommendations also point to the need to explore wider issues about the value of storytelling and the merit of the HTR recommendation about a collective process. This conference is a way of taking forward these recommendations.

To compile the directory of storytelling initiatives the group needed to agree a definition for the Audit. The working definition arrived at was:

A project or process which allows reflection, expression, listening, and possible collection of personal, communal and institutional stories related to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

Projects that were included had this definition of storytelling as their primary motivation. They also focused on first-hand narratives and were projects where the narrator had control over their story.

By looking in depth at the various storytelling and personal narrative projects the report explores this whole area of work. Each project is outlined in detail and what emerges from the collected profiles is a dialogue about the purpose, value and meaning of this work.

It is important to say that we see this audit as an active project. The report published in October is the first version. As we become aware of other projects we will add them to the audit and database. We believe that the audit, with its bank of profiles of storytelling projects will be a resource for the further development of storytelling and narrative work, as well as a stimulus for debate.

What is storytelling?

While the main section of the audit focuses on the projects which fell within the criteria decided by the sub group, it is useful to give a sense of the wider spectrum of activities discussed in the first part of the report. In addressing the question of what storytelling is, its significance and the range of work it encompasses, the Audit talks about narratives and stories in the broadest sense. It notes:

A story or narrative in its broadest sense is anything that is told or recounted, normally in the form of a causally linked set of events or happenings, whether true or fictitious. Stories are a medium for sharing and a vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts to an audience. Through stories we explain how things are, why they are, and our role and purpose within them. They are the building blocks of knowledge and can be viewed as the foundation of memory and learning. Stories link past, present, and future and telling stories is an intrinsic and essential part of the human experience. Stories can be told in a wide variety of ways, which can be broadly categorised as oral, written and visual, and are so all-pervasive in our everyday lives that we

are not always aware of their role as a tool of communication in all societies (Healing Through Remembering, 2005, p.12).

The Report goes on to give examples of the multitude of projects and processes which deal with experiences and incidents about the conflict from the three main categories mentioned above, i.e. (1) verbal or oral storytelling; (2) written storytelling; and (3) visual, creative arts and multimedia storytelling, acknowledging the significant overlap between them.

Verbal or oral storytelling

This is the most traditional way of thinking about storytelling. A number of broad areas can be identified here. There are focus groups, workshops, seminars, conferences and dialogue groups which create opportunities for storytelling, either in public or private settings. This has been common throughout the conflict. There does not have to be a written record of what is said, although some discussions are made public or archived. Another form of verbal and oral storytelling is local history work, documenting life histories and reminiscence groups. Although some of these are focused on community life more broadly there are many projects that have sought to document specific experiences of the conflict. Oral storytelling can also be more formal such as legal testimonies presented at judicial inquiries, public hearings, tribunals, parliamentary debates and giving evidence to bodies such as the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Finally, many stories are documented by journalists and academics, as well as policy-focused and community-based research. Most often the researcher or journalist retains this information but some repositories of data collected in this way are available, for example, in the Linenhall Library or the National Archives.

Written

Written forms of stories about the conflict are the most common. Academic and community-based research published in books and reports is one medium for disseminating and highlighting stories. The print media and popular literature such as newspapers, magazines, periodicals, pamphlets and on-line sources are other vehicles. A popular form of this type of storytelling is the autobiography written from first-hand experience and the biography written in the third-person. Specifically related to the conflict, the Audit notes, more hybrid forms of biography such as Lost Lives have been undertaken. Finally, novels, short stories, plays and poetry have routinely been used either through fiction or based on real experiences to documenting parts of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Sometimes this has been done through specific projects such as community-based creative writing classes.

Visual, creative arts and multimedia

In the Audit it is noted that “Projects that fall under the visual, creative arts and multimedia categories of storytelling include television documentaries, videos, films, drama and performance art, exhibitions and new technologies, including websites and interactive DVDs. A powerful and immediate tool, visual depictions of the conflict have taken various forms over the past 30 years” (Healing Through Remembering, 2005, p.16). The report goes on to outline the following types of storytelling seen in

this area: (1) television and video productions; (2) feature-length films and television dramas (3) drama and performance art; (4) painting, drawing, sculpture, graphic arts, photography; (5) websites and multimedia; and (6) exhibitions.

Although this brief outline does not go into the complexities of storytelling it is presented to provide some stimulus for discussion and highlight how broad the subject of storytelling is.

Ongoing debate

The Audit did not set out to address the wider political questions about the value and use of storytelling to peacebuilding and dealing with the past, although the significance of this debate can be discerned from the description of storytelling initiatives. Another recent forum where this debate is addressed can be found in the evidence submitted to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 'Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland's Past' (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005). Storytelling features strongly in the oral and written evidence presented to the Committee and questions about the value of storytelling as a vehicle for dealing with the past are brought to the fore. Some participants advocate storytelling as a more beneficial process than a truth commission. However, there are those that see storytelling as a component of wider truth-recovery processes and endemically more political. Within this debate many questions remain unanswered and we hope to take up these themes with the conference today.

A number of submissions to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee view storytelling in terms of empowerment. One submission from Bill Rolston makes this explicit. He notes: "Storytelling is a valuable way for individuals or groups of victims to acquire a sense of control over their own lives" (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005, ev270). Noting that many people may not have had the opportunity to tell their story Rolston reflects on the necessary conditions:

It needs to be recognised they must be comfortable telling that story. There are many ways in which they can be made uncomfortable, especially if lacking in confidence, and so must be allowed to tell that story privately, anonymously, informally, without cross-community requirements, if that is what they want. The retort may be that there is not one format which can accommodate those different requirements. If that is the case, so be it; there must be a range of formats. Simply put, victims need to be in control of their own stories (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005, ev265).

This view, echoed by other submissions, is a key issue for HTR's recommendation on a collective or national storytelling process.

Another way of looking at this whole issue is by examining the different expectations that people bring to the process. The HTR storytelling audit finds that several different motivations are involved. Motivations can include: advocacy or promoting change; healing / therapeutic; documentation / historical record; acknowledgement / commemoration; education; and a conduit to other services (Healing Through Remembering, 2005). This is put another way in a recent report from the US Institute of Peace following a conference they hosted on Trauma and Transitional Justice

(Barsalou, 2005). At the conference a participant reflected on the different needs of the storyteller and the way these change over time, noting:

Survivors bring completely different expectations to the process [of storytelling]. Some of them want to be listened to by someone who cares and who takes note of their suffering. Some of them want to tell their story to their community. Some of them want to tell their story because by telling it they can emphasize the need for justice, the need for further investigation. It's a form of presenting their demands or needs. Sometimes it's a process that needs to happen in private (cited in Barsalou, 2005, p.10).

These different viewpoints form part of the ongoing debate about storytelling.

Conference

As the audit research progressed, it was decided that a conference on storytelling should be convened by the HTR Storytelling sub group to present its findings and facilitate a broader discussion on the theoretical, ethical and practical issues around storytelling, locally and internationally. The conference taking place today is not the last word on the subject; on the contrary the conference should be the first step to starting a wider debate on the value and limits of storytelling as a mechanism for dealing with the past.

To explore these questions we have invited two speakers who will examine the work of storytelling or personal histories from different perspectives. The first keynote speaker, Kevin Whelan, will examine the complex relationship between memory, history and testimony at both the individual and the communal level, focusing especially on the ethical issues, as well as truth, justice, the tension between mourning and melancholia, and the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. The second keynote speaker, Samsun Munn, is involved in encounter projects between Austrian Holocaust victims and the sons and daughters of Austrian Nazi perpetrators. He will consider the role of storytelling in encounter and its role in creating 'peaceful constructiveness' with the 'other'.

The second session of the conference will focus on storytelling as a vehicle for dealing with the past. Some of the questions we hope will be deliberated today include: What can storytelling do to help deal with the past? What value does storytelling have in dealing with the past? Can storytelling be used as a way of depoliticising the past and individualising it, taking the focus off corporate responsibility and accountability? Is storytelling as valuable as testimony with a political purpose, or does the value lie in the therapeutic benefits? What ethical standards need to be in place to support people telling their story?

Conclusion

It is clear to all in the HTR Storytelling sub group that we need to continue to explore the issues raised in this paper. The collective or national storytelling process envisaged in the 2002 HTR Report recommendation talks about a standard method. But there are many different methods as the variety of projects in our audit demonstrate and these have all been designed to meet different needs. Can only one

method be chosen? In addition, the sub group is acutely aware of the risk that a collective process might isolate or marginalise the many initiatives grounded in different communities that are described in the report. Our response is that the debate around a collective or national process enables us to explore the issues and questions that surround it. We do not know where this process of exploration will lead us, but precisely because *it is a process* we trust that it will take us to a new place.

References

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