



Brief Stories and the Fictionalization of the Self

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Many years ago, when I was eight or nine years old, a great-aunt of mine told me a story—part-fact, part-fiction—about the devastation of a rural village during the Mexican Revolution, and about how, afterward, the people of the village, in their sorrow and fear, built a protective wall around their settlement to keep away the dangers of the world without. The story was filled with vivid descriptions of cruelty and destruction—old women being burned alive, children mutilated, houses looted and torn down, horses shot. It was the kind of tale to inspire nightmares. For me, it was also a “brief story” that prompted self-reflection on my part and tapped my knowledge of myself as an individual whose personal memories reach beyond that self into an historical past shared by others.

Lukacs (1985) makes the statement that “Historical Knowledge is personal knowledge, including personal self-knowledge” (p. 230) and that “Self-Knowledge, and the existing potentiality of past-knowledge are involved intimately with imagination—a word which suggests a colorful mental construction on the one hand, and an inward tendency on the other” (p. 237). Stated another way, history is what is known about human beings by another human being as he or she understands this through the incorporation of personal memories, group memories, and the artifactual remnants from a past evoked by the imagination. In the sense that they seek continuity in memory and tradition to experience themselves as complete in the cultural and physical environments, children too are historians involved in a never-ending process of reconstructing the past.

I like the quote from Marek’s *Gods, Graves and Scholars*, which Fehrenback (1973) uses as an introduction to the first chapter of his book *Fire and Blood—A History of Mexico*:

The forces of the past still live on and exert their influence on us, though we may not be consciously aware of this. It is frightening to realize in full depth what it means to be a human being; that is, to realize that we are all imbedded in the flux of generations, whose legacy of thought and feeling we irrevocably carry along with us. (p. 3)

If our historical past, our group memories, does not serve to liberate us from the knowledge of terror and despair, cruelty and destruction, neither does it condemn us to historical repetitions and inevitable conclusions. In developing historical consciousness, we do not go through a process of learning about past mistakes to avoid them or past glories to repeat them. We construct our own "brief stories" that engage personal memories in a dynamic interchange of symbols with the experiences of others in the broader context of what the *we* as opposed to the *I* has as a common core of awareness. In this way we achieve, internally and through self-reflection, a basic grasp of our own humanity and of the need of the conscious and self-conscious being to contemplate an answer to the question: "What are the origins of human existence—of my existence, yours, ours?"

I will define my concept of *brief story as history* in this way: As history, a brief story is the recapitulation of the remembered past into which the recorded or orally transmitted past is interjected qualitatively as well as quantitatively. When I speak about the quantitative aspect of the past, I am referring simply to volume of knowledge—the information gleaned from identified authoritative sources, whether they are written documents or an oral tradition passed from one generation to another by the elders and wise men of a tribe. Quantity of information alone does not, of course, lead to the development of historical awareness. For example, if, when I was 10 years old, I had been asked the question: "What do you know about the Mexican Revolution in the state of Chihuahua in 1918?" my answer might have been "I know that General Francisco Villa and his deadly Army of the North destroyed a village where some of my relatives lived, and that the General ordered the execution of my grandfather before a firing squad." Six years later, the quantity of my facts—not only about that particular incident but about the Revolution as a whole—had increased tremendously, that is quantitatively. Qualitatively, I had taken only one small step forward by having discovered the notion of biases in history. I had adopted a perspectivistic approach to the investigation of historical truth and had become adept at stating that "From this perspective, such and such, but from the other perspective, this and that." However, it was not until I was in college working on an undergraduate degree in history that I began to move away from compartmentalization, dichotomies, and linear descriptions to the pursuit of a more interrelated and systemic view of history. History then began to make sense to me in the everydayness of my existence. I was becoming conscious of cultural constraints and of myself as a creature of my particular culture. At that time, I would have found Jaynes'

(1976) comment on the relationship between culture and history to the point:

As individuals we are at the mercies of our own collective imperatives. We see our everyday attentions, our gardens and politics, and children, into the forms of our culture darkly. And our culture is our history. In our attempts to communicate or to persuade or simply interest others, we are using and moving about through cultural models among whose differences we may select, but from whose totality we cannot escape. And it is in this sense of the forms of appeal, of begetting hope or interest or appreciation or praise for ourselves or for our ideas, that our communications are shaped into these historical patterns, these grooves of persuasion which are even in the act of communication an inherent part of what is communicated. (p. 445)

Today the idea that one cannot escape from the totality of a cultural model is, for me, a troubling one, at least at that superficial level which implies a psychological entrapment of some kind, a delimiting of the creative self in a culture-bound world. The creative self is not the invention of culture, but its inventor—historian, storyteller, articulator of a thousand contradictions and of the metaphors that attempt their resolution in the sometimes elegant, sometimes playful context of the imagination. Beyond these “cultural boxes”—these societal constraints, these burdensome conventions of manifest human communication—is the world internalized and everchanging. Wagner (1981) has this to say on the same subject:

Invention changes things, and convention resolves those changes into a recognizable world. But neither the distinctions of convention nor the operations of invention can be identified with some fixed “mechanism” within the human mind, or with some kind of super-organic structure imposed upon the human situation. (p. 53)

What each of us does have, he goes on to say, is a more or less conventionalized “set of orderings and articulations” (p. 53) which are represented to us, through action, in absolute terms:

We participate in this world through its illusions, and as its illusions. The inventions in which it is realized are only rendered possible through the phenomenon of control and the masking that accompanies it, and the conventional distinctions in which control is grounded can only be carried forth by being re-created in the course of invention. (pp. 53-54)

In differentiating between “what the rules call for” in one’s particular culture and what may come to constitute alternatives to these rules, the individual undergoes a process of defining his

field of vision in implicit and explicit contexts of cultural symbolization. In the interpersonal and intellectual sharing of ideas, and in the private internal monologues of self-reflection, human beings generate new symbols, reinterpret existing ones, and negotiate the conventions by which knowledge of the world, and of self in the world, is transmitted and received, transformed and incorporated into the consciousness of a civilization of which the idiosyncratic human being is the unique inventor. As Rogers (1983) so clearly states: "Books, mascara, sweat suits, rose gardens, and the common cold cannot be defined in natural-scientific terms; human beings constitute what they are by lodging those objects in a common world." (p. 146)

On discussing the implications for education of what he refers to as a "negotiatory or 'hermeneutic' or transactional view" on the workings of human cognition, Bruner (1986) tells us that

a culture is constantly in process of being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members. In this view, a culture is as much a *forum* for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules or specifications for action. Indeed, every culture maintains specialized institutions or occasions for intensifying this "forum-like" feature. Storytelling, theater, science, even jurisprudence are all techniques for intensifying this function—ways of exploring possible worlds out of the context of immediate need. (p. 123)

To understand something about the human condition and about my own condition as a human being for whom "nothing returns" and "everything is something else"—to use the words of the Chilean poet Huidobro (1972, p. 23)—I had to distance myself from my own accumulation of historical knowledge and return to it as one returns to a once familiar home now changed by memory and the elements. Once I was able to do this, I could look at not only history, but also folk tales, legends, and the dramatizations of childhood play, as "brief stories" or at least "brief stories in the making."

My presentation addresses two topics: (a) brief stories as history and folk tale; and (b) the fictionalization of the self. As a conclusion I suggest an answer to a question that touches on an issue of interest to teachers, parents, and other adults influential in a child's life: To what extent, if any, should children, especially young children, be exposed to cultural and historical themes of terror and destruction?

Brief Stories as History and Folktale

I do not recall that as a young child I had been frightened or even particularly troubled by the information that during the

turbulent years of insurgency in Mexico my paternal grandfather had almost been executed before a firing squad. Living in a poor Mexican-American barrio in south El Paso, I was no stranger to the reality of an insecure world, that is, of a world in which predictions are difficult to make from day to day. A few blocks from where my family and I lived was a bar where fights took place almost every night. On one occasion, a man was knifed just outside the bar, in plain view of a group of us children who had been on our way to the grocery store to buy ice cream. Our next-door neighbors, Roman Catholic nuns in charge of the Orphanage of the Holy Angel, would discuss these and other such barrio incidents with mother over a cup of coffee in our neat, somewhat Victorian living room. Afterward, they would sing songs together, accompanying themselves on their guitars. And while they would be doing this, I would be imagining myself dressed up as an Adelita—vaquero hat and boots, gunbelt across my chest—playing a guitar and singing a sentimental song about death. Yet I had known that it had been the husbands and lovers of those very same Adelitas who had almost murdered my pacifist grandfather those many years back.

Ortega y Gasset (1967) points out that

The historical past is not past simply because it is not now in the present—that would be an extrinsic characterization—but because it has passed or happened to other men whom we remember, and consequently it keeps happening to us in our continual repassing or reviewing of it. (p. 30)

Between pacifists and firing squads, nuns in starched habits and bar fights were, for me, a guitar of incontestable permanence and uncommon sense—a personal memory of historical proportions. After the soldiers had let my grandfather go, they had poured him a shot of tequila, made a toast, then brought out their guitars and sang a song to celebrate the fact that he had not after all had to die. There had been no hard feelings. There had been only the painfully blue sky, the immense desert, and the sun shining down on a town that, although almost in ruins, was not quite dead and would survive.

In middle-class America—in fact, in Western societies as a whole—few people come in close physical contact with death at an early age. In the barrios and ghettos of this nation, as well as in poorer nations around the world, the living are intimately familiar with death. Yet all human beings fear death in the same way; none of us is free from that fear. Brain (1979) says:

One can conquer and live with fear, but like the native population of a conquered territory, it is always there, always a threat,

always ready to rise again. The fear of being seen to be afraid is probably the most worrisome one to the soldier new to action. And what is it we fear if not the verbal contempt of our fellows, the verbal categorization of coward? But the real fear, the nagging, deep-seated, gut fear, is the terror of mutilation and a death too soon. (p. 25)

If we cannot be free from this fear of death, if we cannot, even as children, be kept ignorant of its reality, we can nevertheless *accommodate* it within ourselves so that we are not made helpless and impotent by it nor overcome by anxiety every day of our lives. I remember the first time that I began reading from *The One Thousand and One Nights* and discovered the essence of exactly such an *accommodation*: Where there is life, there may be death, but where there is death, there may also be life. It is Shahrazad herself who brings to consciousness this unconscious understanding when she asks her father to give her in marriage to the cynical and murderous King:

Either I shall die, and be a ransom for one of the daughters of the Muslims, or I shall live, and be the cause of their deliverance from him. (Eliot, 1985, p. 11)

Bettelheim (1977) approaches an interpretation of Shahrazad's story from the viewpoint of reintegration of the disintegrated personality. The King, who has suffered betrayal and disappointment, must now find deliverance from the domination of his id. This can only be achieved through contemplation, which Shahrazad's tales facilitate, and the regaining of trust leading to the unification of his self.

I view the story of Shahrazad from not an opposite but a different viewpoint—as an insight into the possibilities of reconciling what may appear irreconcilable in our world. Writing on the subject of myth as reconciliation, Crossan (1975) makes this comment: "It is much more important to believe in the possibility of solution than ever to find one in actuality" (p. 54). Brief stories, as history, affect this reconciliation in the context of group memories in which the individual shares and from which his or her personal memories are at least in part derived. As with folktales, fairy tales, and myths, brief stories begin with the individual and in the individual, as a core of possibilities for the thematic reconstruction of a past experienced internally and outwardly manifested in its retelling. Shahrazad's tale doesn't offer a resolution to the reader's fear of death. Rather, it gives him or her a context from which to explore the different aspects of that fear as only he or she can define it. For me, the story has a special significance, for in the tradition of the

Mexican Revolution, the singer of ballads and the teller of tales did not die as long as there were ballads to be sung or tales to be told. After all, there had to be someone around to sing the praises and commemorate the deeds of the warriors.

At this point, I will summarize the incident of the firing squad, because it has some of the characteristics of both history and folktale, and therefore will serve to illustrate my second topic, which is "the fictionalization of the self." The story, which has no title, goes something like this:

Don Mariano López—an amateur artist and committed pacifist—owned a bakery in a small town several kilometers south of the capital of Chihuahua. It was the time of the Revolution of 1910, and, although the town was not of strategic importance militarily for either the government forces or the revolutionaries, the citizens were fearful, and expected that real trouble would come sooner or later. Trouble did come one day—first with the government troops known as "los pelones" because of their closely-cropped hair, then with the revolutionaries. First the pelones would come in for fresh horses, food, and other supplies, then the revolutionaries, for the same thing. People took sides but kept their mouths shut about it—everyone except Don Mariano, who had no qualms about shouting, "Viva Don Porfirio!" when the pelones arrived, and "Viva la Revolución!" when the revolutionaries came around. He had discovered that by showing such enthusiasm he could sell his bread rather than have it simply confiscated. He did not care about politics and detested war, but was much interested in the survival of his family of six. Then, on one particularly busy afternoon, as the troops were arriving, he became distracted and, without stopping to think about it, ran out of his bakery, waving his hat and shouting "Viva Don Porfirio!" at the top of his voice. Unfortunately for him, the soldiers turned out to be revolutionaries, and he was promptly arrested and, without trial, sentenced by the commanding office, a colonel, to die by firing squad.

The second part of the story—which I discuss in my next topic—tells about how grandmother saved grandfather after first having gone through stages of disbelief, panic, anger, and fear. Evidently she made a discovery of some kind when she looked up and saw the sun during a moment in which she was feeling "as if she were inside a prison cell herself, waiting to die." This discovery helped her to resolve inner conflicts that were keeping her in a situation of emotional helplessness, just as her husband was in one of physical helplessness.

In her house, Doña Lucita wept and wrung her hands, and did not know what to do or what to tell her children who, huddled together, kept asking, "What will happen now?" She felt as if she were inside a prison cell herself, waiting to die. So that her children would not see her getting more and more upset, she stepped aside and, through her tears, saw a blurry world of confusion and despair. Then she remembered something that her father used to say to her whenever she would be upset. He would say, "Can you see the sun up in the sky? If so, that means that the world has not closed around you yet!" At that moment she felt a strong urge to glance up at the sky. She did, and saw the sun. Then she was not afraid anymore.

To differentiate between one's own experiences and emotions and the experiences and emotions of a loved one under circumstances of duress is no easy task. Sometimes in this fusion, individuals may jeopardize their own survival and allow the world to close around them like a box into which no light enters and which continues to shrink, suffocating its prisoner. What meaning the sun may have had personally for grandmother, I do not know. But "watchers of the sun" as a motif appears in other stories told in my family.

The story of the firing squad has been told, by different members of my family at different times, in tones ranging from serious, to humorous, to melodramatic and pathetic. It has been treated as commentary on the atrocities of war, as an example of courageous motherhood, as an illustration of the idiosyncrasies of my grandfather, as a piece of historical curiosity, and as an adventure tale more figment than actual occurrence. One of my father's brothers composed a ballad based on that incident and set it to music. Others have written poems and short stories about it. My aunt Martha, the family's historian, conducted some research in an attempt to sort out fact from fiction and was fairly successful in collecting a few names and putting together a chronology of events. But her information had little effect on the story as a story, for it had become the property of individuals. For example, my father incorporated the story into *The One Thousand and One Nights*, which he used to tell, not read, to me when I was a small child. For some time, I would imagine the Colonel dressed in the finery of a sultan, and my grandmother as a princess wearing a veil. Because, ethnically, she was part gypsy, it had not been difficult for me to make this association. To this day, my grandmother, whom I never met, retains in my imagination characteristics of an eastern princess—wise, courageous, devoted—not unlike Shahrazad.

The Fictionalization of the Self

Children fictionalize themselves first in play, then in oral storytelling, and in literate societies, through creative writing, in which they generally do not become engaged until they are in school. At its most basic level, the fictionalization of the self involves the recognition and expression, in one form or another, of similarities between the individual and a prototypical figure, most often of heroic proportions: Superman, an athlete, a revolutionary Adelita, Robin Hood, Ivanhoe, and so on. As opposed to the simulation of adult social roles, which is a part of the enculturation process, fictionalization is a kind of "looking out" at oneself in an actor/observer situation in which the individual plays both roles and is even able to speak about "I" (the observer) and "he/she" (the actor) as if these were two different people. Courage, loyalty, cunning, a sense of fairness are expressed in play and storytelling and incorporated as wish, hope, or desire by the child at this level of fictionalization.

At a more self-reflective level, children, in addition to recognizing similarities, also become aware of and accept differences between themselves and the fictionalized self whom their imagination has created. Within themselves, they incorporate essence and emotive content rather than more apparent behavioral or attitudinal attributes. The badness of the bad guy and the goodness of the good guy resonate in them at different times and under different circumstances without committing them to self-stereotyping, although they may take one specific role or another in a game or as the character of a story invented or retold. Finally, there is the intellectual and consciously metaphorical self-fictionalization which stimulates the creative imagination into the production of artistic works, inventions, and technological and scientific discoveries. At this level of self-fictionalization, the individual, whether young or mature, internalizes a creator-creation interrelationship and formulates propositions about his or her being in the world.

The story of the firing squad has three arguments suggested by someone, sometime, at some place. All of these my great-aunt accepted with equanimity and good cheer, for she had been a woman open to many and varied possibilities and always had a greater interest in other people's conclusions to a tale than in her own. "How do you think Doña Lucita saved Don Mariano?" she would ask us children, then remind us that he had been a baker, a painter, and a pacifist, and that one of those had made a difference to the Colonel somehow.

Coming up with an answer to this question called for framing and reframing the situation, a skill which Tom Sawyer demonstrated well when he transformed the whitewashing of a fence from a boring chore into a thrilling once-in-a-lifetime experience. Would the Colonel have wanted to spare the life of a baker? Probably not because, even if Don Mariano had been the only baker in town, the troop could always eat tortillas. Then what about the life of a pacifist? Certainly not. Pacifism was a dirty word among the fighting men of revolutionary Mexico. That left only the artist. And Mexicans do love their artists, poets, philosophers, and teachers. So Doña Lucita was invented as the spokesperson for the artist. It was in this way that the three arguments of the authors of the tale retold came about: (a) the idiosyncratic artist argument (existentialist); (b) the preservation of the artist as national treasure argument (pragmatic or rational); and (c) the meaning of the artist argument (humanistic).

I suppose that after she had freed herself from the cultural box that held the weak, defenseless, manipulated woman, any or all of these arguments could have occurred to Doña Lucita, as they occurred to us children, or, I should say, to us girls, many years later. Like the tale of Hansel and Gretel, the story of the firing squad with its female hero was of particular interest to the girls of the family. For the boys, its implications were, if not more subtle, certainly more troubling, for it posed several questions that called for stepping outside the cultural box and looking in:

How do soldiers and artists relate to each other?

Is a pacifist unpatriotic or a traitor?

When a man finds himself in the position of being rescued by a woman, does this jeopardize his masculinity? His status in the society?

How does a man think, act, and feel when a woman presents an argument which he cannot refute?

Is a woman unfeminine or eccentric when she is active rather than passive?

In the end, it is not the group but the individual who discovers the answers to such questions in a way that frees him or her from the box into which no light enters and which continues to shrink, suffocating its prisoner.

The fictionalization of the self, then, involves more than moving an imaginary self through a sequence of events that fall between beginning and middle, middle and end of a story. It calls for the authorship of that self within a fluctuating framework of

ideas and emotions, personal memories, intuitions, and the awareness of ever-changing cultural and physical environments.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to look at the question of whether children, especially young children, should be exposed to cultural and historical themes of terror and destruction, and if so, to what extent. Answering this question as stated presupposes at least two conditions: (a) that children are either totally, or to a great extent, ignorant about terror and destruction; and (b) that the exposure or greater exposure to such themes has a detrimental effect on children emotionally or cognitively. As to the first condition, I will say simply that the cultural box—or the constraints that define or attempt to define appropriate ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving for an individual—contains by nature (for such is the nature of culture) our greatest fear, which is the fear of death. The human being is the only animal who can consciously contemplate the end of existence and who has the language to articulate this concept. For young children, intimations of death appear early as fear of abandonment, that is, of their finding their very survival endangered by their parents' own needs, which become differentiated for the child at the instant when they discover themselves as being separate from their source of nurturance.

I have no authoritative source to support the next statement, but the idea makes sense to me or, more accurately, it appeals to my understanding of human impressions and memories of being. I believe that our first child-self, what I like to think of as the fish-in-the-water-self, is one joyfully unconscious, loved and accepted, protected and nourished, centralized and attended to consistently, predictably, and eternally. As we begin to discover the contradictions between this internally contained reality and what actually happens to self in the world, anxiety and uncertainty develop, and along with these the need to resolve the paradoxes which such contradictions engender. This resolution we find not through an avoidance of understanding, not through a walling-in of oneself or of others in ignorance or, to use another term "innocence," but through a search for the achievement of self-knowledge. Brief stories, whether as history or story, help us in the discovery of the terrible and wonderful world of imagination and fact, creativity and destruction in which we exist for better or worse. Croce (1941) states:

We are products of the past and we live immersed in the past, which encompasses us. How can we move towards the new life,

how create new activities without getting out of the past and without placing ourselves above it? And how can we place ourselves above the past if we are in it and it is in us? There is no other way out except through thought, which does not break off relations with the past but rises ideally above it and converts it into knowledge. (p. 470)

And writing on myth as memory, Berdyaev (1923) has this to say:

Each man represents by virtue of his inner nature a sort of microcosm in which the whole world of reality and all the great historical epochs combine and coexist. He is not merely a minute fragment of the universe, but rather a world in his own right, a world revealed or hidden according as consciousness is more or less penetrating and extensive. (p. 670)

In the imaginative act of self-fictionalization, the child probes for a kind of truth about how those things come together which seem so fiercely contradictory about the human condition—joyfulness and misery, faith and unbelief, hope and desperation. Eventually, he or she may discover that between peace-loving folk and ferocious warriors, an arid desert and a desert in bloom, is a brief story of incontestable permanence and uncommon sense—a personal memory of historical proportions. It will be then that he or she will glance up at the sky and see the sun and perhaps not be so afraid anymore.

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