

Watu Wa Amani: Learning Peace in Africa

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Abstract

This essay explores the role of story telling 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.

Introduction

Story telling was central to the Watu Wa Amani (People of Peace) conference convened in Nairobi in August 2004. Representatives from historic peace churches around the world came to the conference, three fourths from countries in Africa—Burkina Faso, Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. They came to hear why people make war and do violence, and to learn how they can make peace and do justice.

Largely they came to tell and to listen to each other’s stories.

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

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), composed largely of religious leaders of different faiths. The elders recommended ways to foster peace, including care and compensation for victims of injustice, and a National Day of Pardon in which the president would address the nation. The president did so, expressing remorse for ways the state had sponsored torture and other crimes against its citizens.

Cathy Mputu and Pascal Kalungu, Mennonites from the Democratic Republic of Congo, told of their country's long years of civil war following independence from colonial rule. They spoke of how 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. The church told the story of Jesus and , prompting some members to return property they had pillaged.

Africans at the Watu Wa Amani conference listened appreciatively to these and many other stories, often with tears, sometimes laughter, and in a context of daily Christian singing, praying and Bible reading. They listened for how each story converged with the story of their personal experience, and how it might intersect with the Christian narrative they shared in common. Westerners at the conference saw themselves as being in the position of listening in; they wondered whether and how, given their colonial history, Western influence is relevant to promoting peace in Africa.

From an educational standpoint, it may be hard to measure the achievement of the conference by the kind of statistical results that Western social science often rightly prizes. But if the conference is viewed as a qualitative case study, we may make the claim that there is inherent value in providing a safe and *peaceful* public space for people to speak of almost unspeakable violence. Story telling became the vehicle of forming a community of common values at the conference and a network of relationships that have continued since the conference. If violence enslaves the human spirit, then an open space for story-telling helps liberate the human spirit to forge new identities and to conceive of creative ways for transforming conflict in the direction of peace and justice. Such a space gives power to those examples where peace and justice have prevailed over violence and injustice; even if these examples seem to be as yet too few or having minor impact, still they are catalysts for further talk and action.

The relation of talk and action is an implicit theme in this essay. On the one hand, we are aware of the standard critique that "all talk and no action" can delay justice. The charge could be made that, granted, story-telling may have much therapeutic value but it

cannot engender the kind of systemic change that Africa needs. We are not claiming that story-telling is the sum of education, or that education alone can bring about peace and justice. On the other hand, we would affirm the value of education based in story-telling. Violence often comes about when there is a rupture in communication, or an inability to imagine alternate endings to conflict. Story-telling addresses both deficiencies; also, for most Africans it is a traditional, pre-colonial mode of communication.

When corruption and violence have become, as it were, the same old story, there is an urgent need to reclaim even older tribal stories, or to retell contemporary stories where peace has triumphed even in the heart of one person or one small community; a need as well to hear afresh the Gospel story of a peace that transcends dividing walls and love that extends, eventually, even to enemies. Here “story” can become not a synonym for talk that evades action, but rather itself a kind of performative action, even sacramental in the sense that it has the potential to manifest the new reality of which it speaks.

In what follows we will tell more of the story of the Watu Wa Amani conference. Because both narrators are educators and practical theologians, it will be told with a view to the theoretical questions that emerged from the practice of story-telling. The intent will not be to answer every question, but to frame salient questions in a way that helps readers to locate themselves within this narrative of violence and peace on the continent of Africa.

The Role of Historic Peace Churches

This section gives some background on historic peace churches, and explains why representatives of these churches decided to convene a conference in Nairobi in 2004.

The name “historic peace churches” was first used in 1935, when representative Friends, Mennonites, Brethren and other interested groups met in Newton, Kansas, to consider their “absolute opposition to war.” They had met previously under the name “Conferences of Pacifist Churches.” Some delegates intended the name change to signal to the U.S. government that their opposition to war was *historic* and did not simply emerge at the time of a draft. The name change did help the churches to make their case

with the government at the advent of World War II. (Likewise today, these churches advise young people to write essays on their peace beliefs, to be placed in church files before a draft is instituted, in order to show their prior personal history of conscientious objection to war.)

After the War, in 1948, historic peace churches participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches, influencing its declaration that “War is contrary to the will of God.” After Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, a member of the Friends put forth a resolution, “to explore means by which the World Council could promote studies on non-violent methods of achieving social change.” Soon thereafter the WCC adopted its Program to Combat Racism. Though the program was widely debated, even accused of funding arms to insurgents, it was praised by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who thanked the WCC for helping to galvanize world opinion against South African apartheid.

When the Central Committee, the administrative body of the WCC, met in Johannesburg in 1994, it was apparent that apartheid would soon be voted out of existence. The opening speaker at that meeting, Methodist bishop Stanley Magoba, declared that given the success of the Program to Combat Racism, this would be a good time for the WCC to adopt another ambitious program—a program to combat violence. Donald Miller, a member of the Church of the Brethren, introduced a formal motion; much debate ensued, some saying that “violence” is too multifaceted to be addressed by a single program. Nevertheless the Program to Overcome Violence was adopted that year, and extended in 1998 when the WCC adopted a Decade to Overcome Violence.

As part of this Decade to Overcome Violence, historic peace churches as well as monastic groups were asked to share their experiences of peacemaking and offer advice. The Mennonite Central Committee responded to this invitation by holding a conference along with Quakers and Brethren at a seminary in Bienenberg, Switzerland, in 2001. After that conference leaders met to plan a second conference in a different location. It was pointed out that there are more Quakers in Kenya than in the United States, more Brethren in Nigeria than in the U.S., and more Mennonites in East Africa than in the U.S. In the past half century, Africa has experienced unprecedented violence, and African

members of these denominations have been asking what it means for them to be called historic peace churches. The early missionaries who came to them did not stress the doctrine of peace, whether due to their alliance with other mission groups or their desire to build the mission on the foundational message of salvation in Jesus Christ before proceeding to more “advanced” teachings.

Thus as part of the Decade to Overcome Violence, representatives of these historic peace churches decided to hold a second conference in Nairobi, with the Swahili name “Watu Wa Amani” (People of Peace). The conference took place on August 8 through 15, 2004, and was attended by about a hundred African and non-African representatives. The number in attendance was determined partly by the amount of funds raised to pay expenses for African delegates.

In this way, the story of the Watu Wa Amani conference is connected to the history of historic peace denominations and the WCC; and in Africa it is connected to the history of the missionary movement that brought Brethren, Quakers and Mennonites to the continent. Also, therefore, it is connected to the history of colonialism. It is debatable whether Anabaptist missionaries, in their pacificism and generally counter-cultural lifestyles, were less in collusion with colonial racism and exploitation than some other groups. It is impossible either to exonerate some denominations from being complicit in general trends and power dynamics, or to pass judgment on particular individuals within any denomination based on those same trends and dynamics.

According to Reuben Ambwaya, an Anglican priest in Kenya, a balanced assessment of the missionary movement needs to take into account both the ways that missionaries brought the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ and the ways they actively participated in or tacitly supported exploitation antithetical to that gospel. He views the missionary movement in Kenya as good overall, due to how the story unfolded. Missionaries came to teach, but the better ones also came to live and learn, and as they learned more about the evils of colonial dominance from indigenous perspectives, they eventually came to work actively for liberation. A less charitable view would be that they were working to undo the damage of predecessors; and some would argue that the liberation movements in Africa did not overthrow colonialism so much as reincarnate it.

Given this ambiguous history, Western members of historic peace churches, as well as other denominations, face both moral and educational challenges when it comes to organizing conferences such as Watu Wa Amani. These challenges are not peculiar to organizing peace conferences, but extend to all the ways that churches in the West interact with African society. The moral challenge may be stated this way: after the era of colonialism has inserted national boundaries and incited tribal conflict, can a path be found that steers clear of neo-colonial manipulation on the one side and self-centered 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. How can members of a church, who are also members of a society identified as oppressors, help those who are oppressed? In regard to “liberation,” which includes freedom from violence and injustice, Paulo 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 feel ambivalence toward the oppressors, resenting but secretly admiring them; too 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 so often 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. Pointing out this dynamic is no defense of oppression, but it does help to show why peace and justice can seem so elusive, even at times humanly unattainable.

All these moral and educational dynamics have bearing on the role of churches in the process of learning peace and justice in Africa. When asking what their role should

be, we ought in the first place to specify on which continent these churches are based. In Nigeria, for example, the EYN (Ekklesiar Yanawa a Nigeria) church is autonomous from the Church of the Brethren. Though it shares common history through the missionary movement, its leadership and power are now indigenous to Nigeria, and its members are no more outsiders to Nigerian culture than are followers of Islam or tribal religions. Their work of peacemaking may owe something to the history of Western influence, but today they would say it is guided exceedingly more by the history of Jesus Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and all else involved in their being the Church.

In the West, members of historic peace churches could highlight their absolute opposition to violence, as well as their opposition to many policies and practices of national governments and multinational corporations. Do these stances put them in solidarity with oppressed groups or victims of violence in Africa? To some extent; nevertheless, any meeting involving both Africans and Westerners has a living history and inescapable power dynamics. Differences were apparent from the start. Westerners who attended the conference paid their own way, while Africans had their tickets purchased for them. In view of such factors, the Westerners asked themselves how they could make a non-coercive positive contribution.

Several avenues appeared, which could serve as points of discussion for future interactions between Western churches and African churches and societies. First, it was essential that the planning process be experienced as one of mutual sharing and decision-making. Hopefully this happened, even though the initial impetus for the meeting came from the first conference in Switzerland.

Second, in considering their own contribution to the conference, the Western planners were guided by the image of creating a safe space, in which they saw themselves as both hosts and guests. This notion of creating safe space stands in stark contrast to prior modes of interaction, which have included grabbing land and making space unsafe.

Third, the content of the conference, in that it emphasized story-telling, was consistent with indigenous ways of conferring. Nelson Mandela, in his famous defense speech at his trial in 1963, recounted: "During my youth in Transkei, I would listen to the stories of our tribal elders whenever they narrated stories of the old times. I was

particularly impressed by the reports about the battles our forefathers fought to defend their home” (Martin, 248f.; quoted in Kobia, 43). Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the WCC, notes that for Africans story-telling has been essential to creating a “communitarian ethic” and “communitarian spirit” (2003, 95-6).

Fourth, the Western planners of the conference openly shared their own convictions and made suggestions. For example, they recommended that the African churches send an equal number of men and women delegates. The response to this prompting was positive. The voices of women were welcomed by all in attendance, though all acknowledged that equal representation would likely not have emerged spontaneously. Agnes Abuom, a Kenyan and a president of the WCC, served as co-moderator of the conference, along with Donald Miller. Africans were attuned to other kinds of equality of representation as well. The Nigerian delegates, for instance, found it remarkable that their group of 22 was finely balanced between the four tribes that make up most of the membership of the EYN church. This fourth guideline connects back to the first. Mutual sharing of concerns and convictions is consistent with a structure of mutual sharing and decision-making.

The Role of Women in Peacemaking

We have just alluded to this issue, and it deserves fuller treatment than we are able to give here. (The issue is currently being studied by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, a colleague at Bethany who also planned many of the worship services for Watu Wa Amani.) Though women’s voices have often been suppressed, the role of women in peacemaking ought to be seen as one of leadership. There are several reasons why this is so. We are considering now reasons that may be distinctive to women rather than men, since obviously peacemaking is everyone’s responsibility.

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. According to the dynamics of oppression, initiative for true

liberation comes from the oppressed; and according to the dynamics of much Christian theology, those who suffer can intercede before God for healing and justice.

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

People at the Watu Wa Amani conference heard the story of a young woman whose older husband attacked her because he blamed her for 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 defended more blows that nearly severed her thumb from her hand, and “she has a scar on her right shoulder that runs vertically to the middle of her back.” She nearly died, yet survived after a long stay in hospital. During her first session at a trauma healing center, she was able to sit and cry, but not to speak a word. With support and encouragement, over time she began to recall and talk of what happened. Finally she was able to tell her story to a group of women in a trauma workshop, thus taking a leadership role that empowered both her and them.

This story points toward another reason for women having a leading role in peacemaking. “Peace begins in the home,” notes Neddy Jyidei, a Kenyan mother of seven. The home can be the site of violence against women, but it can also be the domain where women’s leadership is respected. To the extent that mothers and other women are a child’s first teachers, and to the extent that lifegiving or else destructive ways of dealing with conflict are first learned in childhood, women have a central role in education for peace. Ms. Jyidei believes that peace spreads from the human heart to the family home to the village to the land to the world. If so, then women occupy a crucial mediating role in bringing peace from one home to another. When a strange man arrives at the entryway to a family compound or other living space, he is eyed with suspicion; the drunkard or

potential thief is chased away. If a woman arrives, she will more likely be greeted and welcomed as one who brings peace, as one who can help with the children or housework.

If we consider space from a “psychological” vantage point, we can surmise about further reasons why women are central to peacemaking, in addition to their being victims of violence and their being the first teachers and ambassadors of peace. The womb is our first world, largely a peaceful one. If, as one psychological theory proposes, there is an innate longing to return to a place of quiescence, then women in their space-creating capacity are symbolic peacemakers. We can find other psychological reasons as well. The age at which malignant aggression first manifests itself as a response to conflict is also the age at which the voice of maternal authority is strong in the lives of most children. There are examples where bands of rival men about to engage in violent conflict were dissuaded by determined women who stepped between and told them, in effect, to go back to their homes and behave themselves. In these instances, words become performative.

The Role of Story-Telling in Peacemaking

Nora Musundi, a Quaker from Kenya, spoke of how her family and prayer group responded when ethnic clashes in 1991 spread throughout the country. Many people were killed, many houses were burned. As refugees came to her village, she and her family began to care for them. They donated land on which a community health center was built. Nora decided to serve on a committee of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, doing a grass-roots tour of the country to talk about what causes ethnic clashes. Her prayer group of Quaker women then determined to care for HIV/AIDS victims, train unschooled youth in skills such as tailoring and carpentry, and offer counseling to those in need.

Her story, a recounting of facts, also comprises a narrative. Nora, her family and prayer group may be seen as protagonists of the narrative; also however, in her telling of it, the protagonist in a very real sense is God. She sees herself acting continually in relation to Jesus Christ, and sees events as occurring in response to prayer. This vantage point does not minimize human effort, but it does make the story communal property.

Properly speaking, it belongs to the Church. It becomes a narrative that others can enter into, either to celebrate its victory or emulate its example.

Nora Musundi's story tells of people working for peace by addressing underlying causes of violence. Listeners at Watu Wa Amani also heard stories of peacemaking in the immediate sense of averting impending violence. Filibus Kumba Gwama, president of EYN (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. The next day two thousand Christian men from surrounding villages gathered for revenge. Furious at the damage and the insult, they were ready to attack Muslim neighbors.

At their meeting, Gwama asked, "What will happen after we go to war? Probably one person will be killed among us and maybe one among the Muslim. 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.

Then too the stories at Watu Wa Amani were not only about making peace, whether by averting impending violence or addressing its systemic causes. Many stories were about violence suffered and injustice not yet remedied. They were not "success" stories in any simple sense. Rather in these cases success resides in the refusal to allow violence to have the last word. It is an act of peace to speak a truth and not be silent. The truth commissions in South Africa were not designed to deal with guilt, punishment and restitution in a more Western individualized sense. Telling and listening to personal stories was seen as a way to bring about communal healing.

Thus David Niyonzima told Watu Wa Amani how the Quakers in Rwanda and Burundi support the plan to set Gacaca courts, open sessions within local villages in which the truth of what has happened is declared for all to hear, without particular individuals being declared guilty. 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 established national boundaries placing these people together. There were people wielding machetes, and there was a world averting its eyes.

Amid the pervasive sense that so much is terribly wrong there can also be the natural and 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 hear the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. God in Christ absorbs the guilt. God in Christ returns evil with good, epitomizing love. God in Christ overcomes the violent death-dealing forces, commencing a new reign of justice. While some Western theologians may feel a need to construe different “doctrines of atonement” and to 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, 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 story-telling—which is that stories often have more than one point. Whether we are hearing the stories of people’s lives or “*the*” Christian story, or even hearing the story of how Africans incorporate the Christian story into their lives, the best way to listen is first to indwell the space the story circumscribes. By indwelling we grow to understand the inner logic, which often is not linear. Of course analytical discourse also has its place, and since this essay is mainly that, we may now draw out some theological-educational reasons why storytelling can be valuable for peacemaking.

Story-telling and Creating Space

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. 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 be careful when going into the woods to find firewood or pick fruit, and it is good to stick together. Naturally 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 too 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 as part of the preparation they listen to stories from men about what it means to become a man. In some tribes these stories include exploits about stealing cows from other tribes; or more exactly, they may tell the lesson that it is not really stealing, because any cow you find, wherever it may roam, originally and rightfully belongs to our tribe. In other tribes the stories may include warnings: don't trust or interact with people of that other tribe, because they steal our goats and women.

What can we say about the content and structure of these stories? Obviously the content of every story does not promote peace, and may do the opposite, though it is hard to make quick and definite judgments about the moral world within a story. For example, in a situation where it is assumed that "stealing" is going to happen anyhow, the story may convey that real men steal carefully, by craft and ingenuity, rather than by using

blatant violent force. But we can also imagine how stories could be told that are explicitly about peacemaking, and how they would be effective educationally. Storytelling is a time-honored way of teaching that quickens the imagination and conveys its moral message indirectly, often the most effective way.

Time-honored does not mean unchanging. Features of modernization and globalization effecting every continent may also be influencing the nature of storytelling in Africa. It remains to be seen whether changes, ranging from increased mobility to an influx of Western movies, will mean an erosion of the dynamics that have caused teaching to happen through listening to tribal stories told by elders. But for the present, it is still the case that storytelling creates a familiar learning space for teaching peace.

A second reason why storytelling can be valuable for peacemaking is that it creates a safe space. If we consider literal space, as opposed to the largely metaphorical and psychological space of storytelling, we see that territory is obviously an important factor in violence. Robert Ardrey's 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. Evidently 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 a certain space is the site of scarce water or fertile land. When literal space has become the site of hostility, it is vital for people to be able to retreat to a sanctuary of safety.

When the four tribes that comprise the EYN church met together at Watu Wa Amani, the literal conference area was safe, and there was safety also in telling stories. Any history of conflict between the four tribes became subordinate to their desire to hear one another's stories, to be invited into a safe "space" as hosts and guests, and to recognize the Christian story they share in common. The storytelling does not erase a history of conflict or produce more water-rich land, but it does help to establish a premise of safety and an assumption of sharing, as starting places to surmount those conflicts.

The psychologist Carl Rogers influenced people to see the importance of safe space to resolve personal conflicts in a therapeutic setting. The need for such safety is valuable for groups of people meeting to make peace in other settings. It is apparent that

storytelling had therapeutic and healing properties for many of the participants in the Watu Wa Amani conference. We spoke in a previous section of the woman whose husband nearly killed her with a machete. For a long time she could not speak of what had happened. But when, in a place of safety and with empathetic listeners, she was able to tell her story, the consequence was healing and newfound power. There was healing in coming from the isolation of suffering into community. And there was power too, perhaps due in part 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. Violence that causes people to lose their voice is a horrible kind of disempowerment; but a safe space becomes a healing, empowering space when a person can tell the story of what happened.

A third and related reason why storytelling is valuable is that it can create a communal space. When people share a common story, it fosters a sense of community. A common story may issue in distinctive ideas or competing doctrines, which also merit attention. Nonetheless, when working for peace between people who see themselves as Christians, it is good to return to the common Christian story, even if there are variations in the telling of it. And if we are talking about peace between people of different faiths with different “metanarratives,” still storytelling can provide communal space, in two ways. Many people can enter into same story and locate themselves somewhere in relation to it, even if they find their place on the margin or as an outsider. More important, people can take turns hearing each other’s stories. To share stories is not the same as everyone sharing the same story, nor must people abandon their own narrative framework in order to hear another’s story. A fitting image may be people standing on home ground, but at the border where they can talk to neighbors. Conferences or other places where people gather to share stories can start with a circle of people who are relatively likeminded, and extend outward. As long as they can hear each other, and desire to listen, there can be communal space. There is a premise of sharing and mutuality.

By contrast, discussions for peace that begin with negotiations also tend to start with a premise of competition, mistrust and animosity. While of course it is better to do

battle with words than with weapons, the vision of peace most often circumscribed by “peace treaties” is an abatement of violence amid ongoing tension. It could be said that this minimal peace must be achieved first, before working toward deeper harmony. But the case could also be made that we must first question basic premises, for example the assumption that division will always be stronger than community, or that destructive forces will always win out over lifegiving ones. It may seem farfetched, when there has been a history of bloodshed, to think that peace can be more than a hiatus between outbreaks of violence; and it may seem impossible to imagine mortal enemies inhabiting the same communal space, as if the lion and the lamb really could dwell together in safety. But do we not need such a vision of community, even if it is utopian? When people come together to share the communal space created by storytelling, it can help them to imagine how better to share the earth and its resources.

Thus a fourth and related reason why storytelling is valuable is that it creates an imaginative space. By this we mean a space in which the human imagination is loosened to create a different outcome to familiar patterns of violence. Peacemaking involves people being able to imagine and internalize stories that end in peace rather than violence. 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, 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 will do; what will Jesus 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 and leave people alone. But the biblical ending is different: Jesus befriends Zacchaeus and shares a meal with him; and Zacchaeus, who has been the enemy of his people, becomes free to make amends and be their friend. The

different ending helps children to imagine different endings to their own life stories. At any age when society is teaching justification by works, this story enables them to learn justification by faith, a central aspect for Krych as a Lutheran. But of course there are other aspects to the story as well. It could teach that coming together to share a meal sometimes issues in the desire to seek peace with justice, even when justice entails making restitution; it could teach that it is possible for the enemy to become the friend. We recall how the story inspired Congonese Mennonites to make restitution after they had participated in the widespread looting.

In the context of teaching children, Krych explores convergences between storytelling and Paul Tillich's existential theology; in a different but compatible manner, Samuel Kobia 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 *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 out of the "cloth" of given facts. Kobia concurs with the accepted opinion that "Africans are worse off economically today than they were at independence" (2003, 143). He summarizes: "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 services and lower value for their cash crop. One could go on and on" (145).

At the same time Kobia disagrees sharply with an article in *The Economist* that characterizes 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 notes. 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.

Storytelling can help people to imagine how seemingly immutable facts can be changed. While it may appear that “tribal” identities are intrinsic to human nature, Kobia calls them “historical and not metaphysical.” In fact, he implies, the “tribe” is largely a colonial construct that needs to be abolished (2003, 121). Obviously Africans experienced a sense of kinship before colonialism, but “contemporary uses of the term tribe were developed during the 19th-century rise of evolutionary and racist theories to designate alien non-white peoples as inferior or less civilized and as having not yet evolved from a simpler, primal state” (2003, 45).

Here one could point to ways that the imaginative space created by the Christian story enables people to see themselves in a new light. When Jesus says, “this is my blood,” theologian James Loder hears him saying, in effect: now you are in a new bloodline. Ethnic identities are not erased—in fact, the sense of particularity is heightened in every way—but a new unity is given by sharing the common cup. Similarly, in his book *Jesus and the Land* (? check title), W.D. Davies discusses how the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus himself as the Promised Land. He is the vine, and the bread that nourishes. Jesus, we see with the woman at the well, makes all physical places relative. The holy mountain is the body where true worshipers gather to worship God “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23).

In short, the Christian story invites people to imagine a space in which basic sources of violence, such as land and tribal identity, become relativized by relationality—by the quality of relationality people receive from God and share with each other. According to a classic telling of the Christian story, this relationality is already the gift of grace, received at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the church, bringing peaceful unity and the power to make peace in the world. If this is the case, then Christian forgetfulness is a prime source of violence. Continually the gift needs to be remembered, and the church re-membered.

Thus a fifth way that storytelling is valuable to peacemaking is that it can provide a space for remembering and re-membering. Kobia says that, especially for Africans,

“The importance of re-membering what was dismembered cannot be over-emphasized...Part of the crisis of modernity is the growing trend of discontinuity and the death of memory” (2003, 101). Memory loss has led to less identity and more violence. By contrast, “A communitarian ethic consistent with human dignity calls for deep remembering, a task requiring new schools of thought, new moral courage and new ways of learning from each other within, across and between our communities” (2003, 97). Kobia believes that storytelling is intrinsic to learning this communitarian ethic.

The Rest of the Story

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 beyond that the manner in which it is told, and above all the Spirit or spirits that are invoked in the telling of it. In this essay 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, though we have indicated the importance of creating communal space.

The Watu Wa Amani conference is a case study that demonstrated, at least to its participants, the valuable role of story-telling 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, as we have indicated, 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.

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 trusting 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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