

The Story Project: First Thoughts

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We kill out of hatred. We hate out of ignorance, and fear. In our ignorance we dehumanize others, so they can be killed without regret. We fear others simply because they are different. They appear different because their stories are not known to us.

The Nazis were extremely well-versed in defining difference, and in determining who was to be considered human and whom subhuman. They were masters of the art of stereotyping beyond the point of caricature. Their victims were denied the right to communicate their stories through bannings and book burnings.

The people it is easiest to kill are those to whom we deny the possession of story altogether. Through that lack of story they appear to us subhuman, indistinguishable from the fauna or flora we use to support our own lives. Their lives become forfeit to our own. We kill them with impunity.

The last recorded act of genocide towards the Australian aborigines occurred in the late 1930s. Their legal status as *fauna*—animals—granted to them when the British government declared Australia *terra nullius*—land without people—in the 18th century, and their position as the property of the Crown, continued until 1968 when they were permitted to become citizens of their own country.

As animals rather than people the aborigines could be killed without penalty. As non-humans and objects to be owned they were denied the right to possess stories and to tell stories. Those given over to the custody of missionaries had the legitimacy of their creation stories denied. They were decried as evil.

The people of the Australian aboriginal nations are consummate storytellers. They regard their historico-mythical stories in the same way as a factual account of what someone did yesterday. In fact time as we know it does not exist in their world view. In their view, the time of the world's creation—the Dreamtime—is inextricably interwoven with the here-and-now.

Their understanding of space is also unique. Every object and each animal in the landscape has stories attached to it. As creatures of that landscape, aborigines inherit those stories and pass them on, especially the lore of their totem animal. It causes them immense pain when their right to relate stories is forbidden, as it was for so long.

The current process of healing, and of eventual reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians, is being aided by many aborigines starting to find their voice and telling their stories in the form of screenplays, films, radio, novels and autobiographies. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is the first Hollywood feature film made of a real aboriginal story, to a script written by an aborigine, developed from a biographical history written by an aborigine.

This century seems set on being the era of many small-scale undeclared wars of long duration, instead of fewer but larger global wars of shorter duration. In the place of hot or cold wars formally declared between states and their allies, for the sake of ideology or land grabs, we have conflicts within nations between ethnicities, religious groups, artificial distinctions imposed by former colonial masters, social classes, and interest groups of

various kinds, for the sake of difference.

Current armed conflicts, with the exception of the Maoist rebellions in Nepal and Peru, are ideology-free. The land-grab wars, once so common during mass migrations across Europe and Africa and the Americas, have largely disappeared. I define terrorism simply as undeclared war between peoples rather than nations and their armies.

Consider recent wars that have attracted media coverage.

Rwanda—war between the Tutsis and Hutus, two groups artificially created by former colonists, and subsequent genocide.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a nationalist/religious war between two Semitic peoples with roughly equal claim to the same territories.

Afghanistan—two fundamentalist religious organizations at war with the idea of modernism, globalism and fundamental human rights represented by the United States, as well as with various ethnic groups within their own nation.

The Balkans—wars between Christian denominations, between Christians and Muslims, between the dominant ethnic group and minorities.

The facts of what religions purport to be about, of what their core beliefs are, as is subject to manipulation, of false storytelling, as any other subject. The Koran condemns the killing of innocents, and the act of suicide, yet Palestinian Muslims turn themselves into human bombs in street markets. The Bible says “You shall not kill,” yet Christians and Jews kill relentlessly. Do people really *know* what their own supposed beliefs are?

The media of the twenty-first century is well practised at covering wars and telling the human stories behind the statistics. They are efficient at entering the location of new conflicts and broadcasting blow by blow accounts to the world. They have a well-oiled high-speed image, text and movie distribution mechanism in the form of satellite television news, cable networks and terrestrial broadcast, as well as newspapers and the remnants

of formerly influential news magazines, and have added news websites to their arsenal.

There is hardly a spot in the world that doesn't receive news in one of these forms or another. Yet people remain in ignorance of their neighbors, and continue to kill them. Blatant lies continue to be told by leaders, and are believed by their followers. Whole nations continue to put faith in assertions not borne out by the facts. And many people have so lost faith in the conventional media that news footage of real events can be dismissed as fake.

Very occasionally someone in the media goes through the exercise of plucking a handful of regular citizens from each opposing camp, putting them in the same room for some time, and seeing whether sharing stories has an effect in softening attitudes. Inevitably, it does. The participants vow to stay friendly and work for peace with each other, despite often continuing to hold the same political views as before. They have become humanized.

I watched a program like this that was made in Israel. Half the participants were Israeli, and half Palestinian. They were in their early twenties. You could not tell them apart simply by looking, or by their accents, given how so many people from both sides have sojourned in many other countries. The show ended on a positive note. They all vowed to keep in touch, and to work together despite their differences. They may solve the problems their elders cannot.

A similar thing occurred closer to home, where the exchange of stories led to the beginnings of an understanding. A relative by marriage is an old school racist, who believes that the Australian aborigines should have been exterminated on the arrival of the British. His justification is historical. He believes that as successive waves of immigration swept over Europe they wiped out their successors, and the same process should have happened here. His interpretation of history is of course grossly inaccurate.

One day he picked a tradesman out of the phone book, who turned out to

be an aborigine. They began talking while the plumber made his emergency repairs, and with the exchange of stories the man became humanized for my relative. It was the beginning of something. My relative still holds most of the same views, but now he knows a man with stories, and respects him as a man. Previously, that was unthinkable.

It is not only armed conflict that benefits from ignorance and the failure to share stories. On the news just now are two items about the Catholic Church's cover-up of the sexual abuse of children, and another one on the accelerated spread of AIDS in Africa and Asia.

In the former case, the victims were shamed into silence and the church's leadership failed to admit the truth, discuss it and act on it. In the latter, whole populations are too squeamish to discuss the cause of AIDS and how to prevent its transmission. Yet they are not too ashamed to practise unsafe sex with abandon. The sharing of stories, the personal admission of truth, might have led to other less radically life-altering outcomes.

Everywhere we are faced with the failure of conventionally delivered, conventionally created, stories to influence beliefs and actions. There is a barrier between professional product and the people it is directed at. The professional reporter's stance of disinterested objectivity has failed. Yet when people share their own stories on a personal level, in full subjectivity, they begin to take notice of each other.

Right now, personal storytelling is restricted to the work of individuals who have taken the process into their own hands. The stories that need to be told, in the volumes that will establish real and lasting change, are not being created or disseminated.

What is to be done? There are enough problems in the world that badly need addressing—hunger, exploitation, AIDS, the gulf between rich

and poor, over-dependence on fossil fuels, the state of the environment—without hatred and armed conflict getting in the way. We need an accessible means for everyone to recognize each other's humanity, and a way for us to achieve that through story, to make killing a less thinkable option.

Digital technology provides the means and the Web points the way. The **weblogging** movement demonstrates how people love to write about intensely personal issues and especially experiences, and that other people enjoy reading about them. Even better, for younger generations raised in visual storytelling, text-heavy weblogs as we know them are about to **mutate** into systems for the delivery of multimedia content using new Internet **standards**, even when their readers do not have broadband access.

Inevitably, the means of producing and publishing web-based stories will continue to fall within the reach of many more people than currently. The learning curve will gradually lessen as the tools become better. Internet access growth trends will continue. As the standards become established the exchange of stories between private and mainstream media writers, and between individuals, will grow easier.

However, we cannot afford to wait until then. The peace of the planet cannot afford such a leisurely wait. We need to kickstart the story flow by training, making the tools and the access available, and helping plant the idea far and wide that sharing story is the way towards humanizing your enemies.

We need pilot projects to prove the concept.

The necessary technology, and the financial power to acquire it, is uniquely centered in the United States. Other First World nations have technology and funds but not the leadership. Some, like Australia, are First World nations with some Third World conditions and lack the United States' strong tradition of charitable organizations facilitating change. Either way, they rely on the US to act first and

show the way forward.

The precise nature of such as pilot project is beyond the scope of this document. More so as my first thoughts on its nature and how it should then grow from a localized effort into a series of globalized ones makes assumptions about conditions that so far have not been proven through local research.

Local partners who can slip into becoming global ones are necessary, as is a federal government that has committed to a new and improved foreign aid effort encompassing more innovative solutions than the embarrassingly wasteful gaffes of the past.

Despite the inappropriateness of providing a complete solution here without research, here is one suggestion for a pilot project with a low enough barrier to entry.

Define a series of disadvantaged school districts with poor access to technology and the web. Build relationships with schools, religious and community organizations within those districts. Make sponsorship and purchase discount arrangements with corporate sponsors. Approach appropriate software developers to retool existing products so they fit the project's specific needs. To maximise publicity, ally with interested charitable organizations, and alert the media, especially those with an interest in technology and communications.

Then, equip a suitable vehicle with enough digital still and video cameras, computers and production tools to provide places for an optimum number of users working simultaneously, and go on the road.

Spend enough time in each location so that people can learn the skills they need to get started, and to build a publishable project, or to get into the groove of writing their text, making their images, and publishing their stories. We will have already set up the systems for making the content they create available to as many people as possible.

Point those who have suddenly found their niche to where they can go for further learning, ongoing access,

scholarships, or on-the-job experience. In all cases we will have researched this beforehand, and in most instances we will need to consider how to provide further opportunities in the longer term.

Some people may establish a new avocation. Others might well find a new profession for themselves. A few will try it, and seldom do it again. But at least they will all have had the chance.

Either way, we will have planted seeds in those communities and pointed the way to break out of the ghetto of non-communication, apprehension and lashing out at the unknown. We will have assisted a number of individuals into careers they might never have been able to consider before. We will have helped many people find their way into speaking for themselves, as it were, and being heard by people they wouldn't even have said "Hello" to before.

When we have proven the concept to satisfaction, and we apply the lessons we learn to our practices, we go global on a local level and take the project into those parts of the world even more disadvantaged than where we began.

A project like this is one for the long haul. It must be done in stages, with each stage proven in practice. It is a question of planting seeds with the possibility of exponential growth. 