

GRACE NOTES IV

DR SALMA SIDDIQUE considers the way stories tell us of our place in the world.

FINALLY, I REALISE the plot and direction of the narrative of this column is about questioning the presence of stories within our collective memory and how this contributes to an individual's sense making. Cultures tell stories of creation, destruction, justification, rejection and above all acceptance. Each story holds a symbolic meaning through the transformative power of events that have or have not happened. The stories will change over time. We may create stories but stories are also created for us as myths that we are born into, and collected as cultural material such as songs or play.

The two stories to which we are first introduced as children are the story of love and the story of loss. Throughout our lives we participate in the (psychological) game of hide and seek where individuals conceal themselves in the world, to be found by one or more seekers. The game is played by the group designating one individual as 'it'. The ritual starts with 'it' counting while the others find places to hide. After a period of time, 'it' goes seeking for the other players. Once the individual is found out then the player has to run to the base without being tagged by 'it'.

The notion of the 'it' can be labelled as the 'scapegoat' from the Hebrew 'azazel' which literally means 'goat of departure.' This is from ancient times when a community took a goat from the herd and metaphorically wrote on it their stories of misfortune and despair. The goat was then cast into the flowing water and swept downstream away from the village. The act of scape-goating acts as a 'process in which the mechanisms of projection or displacement are utilised in focusing feelings of aggression, hostility, frustration, etc., upon another individual or group; the amount of blame being unwarranted.' (source Mondofacto.com) The 'it' of the story of the 'Other/Otherness' which is 'not us' holds discomfort, uncertainties and the unknown. The narrative is the plot about which Lacan (2001) questions 'who we are in relation to 'Other' people'.

Through language we communicate our stories which are told to us in infancy about the 'other' and which form our social relationships, create our identity and our developing self-image. The story of other/otherness can be a story of alienation and fear. The m(other) is the first

object that represents the 'not me' for the child (Lacan, 2001). Stories told to children can be powerful. For example, stories about women's inferior place in society include that of Eve being made of Adam's rib. Many are stories of scapegoating minority groups or tagging individuals as a way of holding the split of sacred and profane (good or bad) in society.

As a therapist I can sit down and face my client – a man or woman who has witnessed or directly experienced violence/abuse and who find themselves as 'it', the 'scapegoat', 'the outsider' in the narrative. The story between the client and therapist should integrate aspects of the self and can dialogue to offer an understanding of the relationship of self within society. It seems important to realise this and go beyond the binary opposition of self and 'other/otherness'. The story is much like Lacan's mirror stage where the child (ego-state) recognises him/herself in the reflection of the story (literal) or other symbolic system where one becomes a character /the object of the story. Lacanian thinking (quoted in Mellard 2006) observes the story 'I began with the Imaginary, I then had to chew on the story of the Symbolic... and I finished by putting out for you this famous Real.'

I am reminded of the power of the hidden story and trying to seek the truth when I read the news of the 14-year-old Pakistani girl, Malala Yousafzaib, shot in the head by a Taliban gunman as she sat in the school bus, for speaking out for the right of education for girls in Pakistan. It is the power of the story which is transformed in the 'imaginary' of religious scripture, fairytales and the learning lost in reality (Winnicott 1971).

Can we ever transcend the story of scapegoating in society? Can I as a therapist, a child of immigrants and a woman hold a mirror to society through the stories I hear, tell and recognise what is created between us. Each story is my story, your story, our story and their story.

References

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