



NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Hidden Stories, Toxic Stories, Healing Stories: The Power of Narrative in Peace and Reconciliation

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Research on narrative is more than simply listening to (more or less) nice stories. There are stories that are *hidden* between the lines; these need to be noticed and retrieved. There are stories that can be *toxic* to be exposed to; these need to be coped with and conceived. But there may be stories that have a *healing* quality, too—stories that can contribute to peace and reconciliation. These three possible qualities of narratives are the focus of the following paper, which was delivered in October 2008, at the launch of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. The lecture was based on his interdisciplinary research project “Geschichte und Erinnerung” [History and Memory, www.geschichte-erinnerung.de] in which interviews with Nazi followers, bystanders, and perpetrators were conducted and analysed. Marks presented one of the key findings of this research—*shame*—and its effect on what the interviewees recounted, as well as its relevance for National Socialism and present-day German society.

It was in 2002 when I heard Bill Randall (2007) compare memory to a compost heap: memories are laid down, decompose over time, and ultimately transform into compost, something life-giving: fertile soil for future generations. I was immediately intrigued because this is exactly what I was trying to do in Germany: trying to find ways for us Germans to deal with our history, National Socialism, in constructive ways.

Composting—now what could that mean for the German people and our memories of the Nazi years? Questions came up: What if there are too many meat scraps in the compost pile, too many corpses? What if the piled up compost has never been stirred—so no “fresh air of consciousness” can enter the pile, as Ira Progoff (see Randall, 2007, p. 625) writes? What if the compost is covered with thick plastic wrap, sealing it off from fresh air? With more and more memories piled up on the wrap, pressing the bottom parts of the compost together?

This is what we experienced in the research project, History and Memory, that I had founded in 1998. As an interdisciplinary team, we conducted interviews with Nazi followers, bystanders, and perpetrators. We explored their motives in joining the Nazi movement: why did they follow Hitler?

This question was still regarded as a “mystery”—as the renowned historian Joachim Fest stated in 2004—even though National Socialism has

probably been investigated more than any other topic. Yet most research focused on facts, numbers, structures, and data. Research focussed on the lives of a small number of Nazi leaders and on the suffering of the victims. All of this is important. However, the motives of the millions of “ordinary” Nazi followers were left out.

We all have seen pictures showing crowds of men, women, and children cheering and applauding Hitler. What was so exciting? We tried to find answers to this question based on interviews with some of those people involved, with Nazi followers. Astonishingly, they had hardly been asked this question before. So what happened when we asked it?

Many of our interviews started with the old men and women assuring us that Hitler was a criminal and that the Holocaust was a mistake. This was the *one* story. However, there seemed to be another story hidden underneath, when the same interviewees—just a few minutes later—would speak with shining eyes about their “encounter” with Hitler and describe the Nazi years as a most exciting, marvellous time.

That hidden story has hardly been narrated in post-war Germany: anyone who spoke about his or her “positive” memories of the Nazi years was suspected of still being a Nazi. These memories were taboo, sealed off from public discussion: like under plastic wrap, covered up for decades. You can probably imagine what happens when such plastic wrap is suddenly lifted a bit, after so long.

One of our first interviews began as follows: the interviewer rang the doorbell, the door was flung open, and he was rounded on by the old lady, saying: “It’s about time! For 50 years we were not allowed to speak.” It was like opening a can of worms. Regularly, our interviewees were barraged with an intense outburst of words. As a consequence we were often left with intense emotions, so-called counter-transference reactions: interviewees often felt run over, bulldozed, emptied, sickened, or confused. In the nights following an interview, we were often haunted by violent nightmares. Two of the few interviews that were conducted by students resulted in the young interviewees having crying fits. Another student became almost infected with the fascination that the interviewee had experienced with Hitler. Because of the toxic quality of most of the narratives, we discontinued working with student interviewees.

We continued our research with a core group of older and well-experienced interviewees, all members of the first post-World War II generation. With peer-counselling and team-counselling, we carefully observed and analyzed our counter-transference reactions, because they contain important information about the hidden stories. This method of qualitative research was established by the ethnologist Georges Devereux (1967).

One of the most noticeable reactions we experienced consisted of *shame*. That came as very surprising to us: we, the interviewees, often left an interview feeling ashamed. Now what did that mean? What did shame have to do with National Socialism? We had actually never thought about

that before. So as a next step we informed ourselves about shame. And now I want to give you some basic information about shame—before I return to the interviews.

What is shame? In his novel entitled *Shame*, Salman Rushdie (1983/2000) writes: “Imagine shame as a liquid. Let’s say it’s like a sweet drink that you get from a drink dispenser. You just push the right button and a cup plops down under a spurt of the liquid” (p. 125). The author is describing how a parent’s shame is being bottled into the infant’s soul. He describes a birth scene: the father, a patriarch and militarist, reacts with scorn at the news that his firstborn child is “only” a girl. At this, the infant girl blushes. She is ashamed right from her birth. This girl grows up mentally handicapped and later becomes a murderer.

I would like to speak briefly about the psychology of shame—based on the works of Donald Nathanson (1987), Michael Lewis (1993), Micha Hilgers (1997), Leon Wurmser (1997; 2007), Allan Schore (1998), and others—just a rough summary.

Shame is universal. We have all experienced it, although in different ways and intensities. It is different for men and for women, and has differing cultural characteristics. Although shame is painful, it does have three healthy aspects. First, healthy shame regulates belonging, so that we know how to act appropriately and not cause embarrassment. Second, healthy shame protects our boundaries and limits with others, defining what is private, what is public—how much of ourselves we can allow to disclose in a given situation or keep to ourselves. Third, healthy shame protects our integrity, so that we know how to act in accordance with our conscience, values, and ideals, so we can look at ourselves in the mirror each day. However, if there is too much shame, it may become pathological. This is like drowning in shame, being flooded by feelings of unworthiness.

Shame may be triggered first, when we forfeit belonging to our family, group, or society, because we haven’t fulfilled their expectations or ideals. For example, in Germany, weakness is traditionally regarded as shameful: such as being poor, unemployed, lacking education, having debts, being dependent, losing, living on charity, and the like. Second, shame is triggered when our physical or psychological boundaries have been trespassed, when our space has been violated. This is the shame of the victims. Typically, survivors of rape or torture are left behind with immense shame. Third, shame is triggered when we have lost our integrity because we have violated our conscience, when we have been violators of others. This is the shame of the perpetrators.

The precursors of shame develop from the early communication between child and parent. This communication takes place mainly through body and eye contact. The kind of eye contact that the child experiences is later internalized as the view of oneself, whether we “see” ourselves in appreciative or disdainful ways. Infants have an intense need for communication, a need to see and be seen, to fascinate and be fascinated.

The child is seeking to be “responded to by the gleam in the mother’s eye,” as Kohut states (1971/2009, p. 117).

For healthy shame to develop, it is essential that the infant sees shining, loving eyes, that it is protected and its boundaries are respected, that a person is reliably present. Healthy shame can develop when the child feels that it is loved for what it is: even though it is weak, even if it shows “undesirable” emotions such as pain or sadness.

Pathological shame is set up if the communication between child and parent is disturbed. For instance, if the parents are intrusive, if they don’t respect the child’s boundaries—or if the child looks into cold or scornful eyes (in superstition called the “Evil Eye”). Pathological shame is set up if the parents cannot mirror their child lovingly because they are mentally absent, addicted, or traumatized. This may be caused by individual failures of the parents or may be rooted in social conditions such as cultural patterns of child-raising. For example, the main Nazi manual of child education strongly advises that if the infant is crying, it should be put into a separate, quiet room. It is to be taken out briefly, every four hours, to be breast fed.

Obviously, a reliable, loving mirroring in the parents’ eyes cannot occur then. The infant feels unloved, unworthy, and existentially threatened. Such early experiences may develop into pathological shame if a person experiences further humiliation, abuse, or other trauma. This may be an individual’s fate, but may also come from a collective experience: for instance, when people are disdained or excluded because of their “wrong” gender or social class. One example would be the Pariahs, the Untouchables, of Hindu society.

Pathological shame means that the humiliation that one has experienced is being internalized. The look of the others has now become one’s own view of oneself. One’s self-esteem is fundamentally low: having made a mistake is now experienced as to *be* a mistake. Shame is a much deeper fear than that of punishment: it is the fear of psychological annihilation, of expulsion from society.

In such a state of fundamental fear the so-called “reptile-brain” takes over. The nervous system is focused only on escape from the source of the fear and is reduced to the most simple patterns of behaviour of fight, flight, or hide. Shame is “a cognitive shock, derailing higher cortical function” (Nathanson, p. 26). Neurobiological research on shame shows that reason, memory, speech, and affect-regulation are not available in this state. One feels dumb and unworthy, like a Nothing. Shame feels so unbearably painful that it will often be defended against, warded off; i.e., shame is replaced by other, more endurable behaviours. Here are some examples:

- One doesn’t show “weak” emotions such as love, hope or pity, since they are the most private and vulnerable aspects of oneself. One’s emotional life is being frozen (“a rock feels no pain”). In order to hide or disappear, one may become expressionless (“cool”), this may lead to suicide.

- In order to be “on the safe side,” one expresses oneself only in negative cynical ways.
- Shameful aspects of one’s self (such as weakness) are projected onto others, who are then blamed as “weaklings.”
- In order not to feel one’s own shame, one forces others to feel it. Therefore, others will be shamed, ridiculed, humiliated, disdained, turned into numbers, done away with, and eradicated, especially those who are regarded as “weak.”
- In order to conceal one’s lack of self-esteem, one puts up a façade of arrogance: for instance, a swaggering masculinity.
- In order to conceal one’s shame, one demonstrates one’s shamelessness: brags about one’s ruthlessness, abuse of power, and disdain for humanistic values.
- Through violence, powerlessness is turned into power (“I’d rather be a criminal than a nothing”). For example, a young man running amok in a school wrote in his suicide farewell letter: “You always ridiculed me—now you must pay for it!”
- Another defence strategy consists of efforts to restore one’s honour. People do incredible things if their honour is endangered. For example, every year an estimated 5000 women worldwide are reportedly killed by their father or brother, because they have ruined the honour of the man and his family—for example, by refusing to go through with a marriage arranged by their parents. It is no coincidence that initiation in militaristic subcultures starts with the inductees being humiliated. Their subsequent efforts to restore their honour through violence are then used by the military leaders for their own purposes.
- The feeling of unworthiness may also be compensated for with grandiose fantasies or idealisation of a person, group, or nation, or with perfectionism. The message is: “Only if I’m perfect can I not be put down. I can only be loved when I have achieved great things, or if I have a perfect wife, perfect son, perfect car, etc.”

These are some of the most important defence-mechanisms (another one is dependency) with which shame is warded off. Obviously, unconscious, defended shame is poisoning our relations—with arrogance, humiliation, cynicism, and violence.

Social scientists have explored the social functions of shame and its defence-mechanisms, and have concluded that they are a commonly used means to establish status, power, and powerlessness. Because shame is such a painful and unconscious emotion, it has the potential to be easily utilized: Power consists of the ability to force others to feel ashamed. This works in youth gangs (bullying) or at work (“mobbing”), but also in politics. I’d like to illustrate this with excerpts from one of our interviews with a Nazi follower.

The following passage is abbreviated by about 50 percent. The interviewee, let’s call him Mr. Plessner, was born in 1918 in a small town near the Rhine river, which was on the border with France. There, the Rhine

is about a thousand feet wide. On the opposite side was the French fortification wall, the so-called “Maginot-Line,” which was guarded by French soldiers. In the following excerpt, Mr. Plessner switches between two different time frames: the years before and after 1933, when Hitler came to power. This is how his story begins:

We, the youth, went through life with open eyes, really open eyes. Remember 1932, Adolf Hitler’s visit to the nearby city of Freiburg. He passed by us, the whip in his hand, and he looks each person in the eyes. That was very impressive. Of course, we had put all of our ideals into him.

Imagine that life in the village was simple, modest. When the children came home from school, there was just a note on the table: “You take the hoe and go to such and such place.”

And late in the evening the children were so tired, they fell asleep on their chalk boards. The mother said: “Now you go to bed and tomorrow morning you’ll quickly do your homework so that the teacher is satisfied.” Everything was in a bad state. And then National Socialism came. We experienced sports, camping out. The youth were inspired and had a sense of meaning. For us, this was a liberation. Suddenly one could be proud to be German.

We lived near the Rhine river. At school we wrote dictation to the sound of the French military signal horns. On the bunkers of the Maginot Line, the Senegalese negroes were standing in their grey uniforms with the scars in their faces and looking over to us like evil spirits. And that impressed us very much. Germany was the Pariah among the peoples. We knew that we had to experience much, much evil because of the dictates of the Versailles treaty. We were indebted to pay billions of gold-marks. But Germany had to be reintegrated into the family of European peoples. Germany, the heart of Europe, could not be a starving country, living on the charity of other nations. So it was necessary that it should become great again. And Hitler was the incarnation of this idea.

A few minutes later, Mr. Plessner recalls his second “encounter” with Hitler at the Nazi party congress in Nürnberg in 1935: “He drove by slowly in his car and looked each one in the eyes. This look moved Hitler Youth Leaders to enthusiastic cries, greeting him with tears in their eyes as a Messiah, a saviour.”

Now, what did we hear? The interviewee depicts Germany before Hitler came to power: it was a poor country (“in a bad state”). Unemployment was high; Germany had huge debts, was dependent, and living on charity. It had lost World War I. Education was poor because the children had to work all day. All of these were reasons to feel ashamed, because traditionally all of this was regarded as shameful: being poor, unemployed, lacking education, having debts, being dependent, losing,

living on charity. Consequently, Mr. Plessner is describing Germany being in a state of shame and excluded: not belonging to the family of European peoples, but rather a pariah, an embodiment of shame.

In contrast, Hitler is characterized as the one who restored Germany's greatness and honour. Suddenly one could be proud to be German. Hitler was idealized; as Mr. Plessner puts it: "We put all of our ideals into him."

Isn't it striking how "looks" (eye contact) are addressed by the interviewee? At the very beginning, he says: "We went through life with open eyes, really open eyes." But the eye contact with his parents was missing: When he came home from school, there was no one to welcome and look at him, just a note on the table.

Then Mr. Plessner depicts the look of the French soldiers: the "Senegalese negroes from across the Rhine (the border, boundary) with their scars and grey uniforms, were looking over to us (...) like evil spirits." This might be interpreted as obtrusive "evil eyes."

Finally, the eye contact with Hitler. Notice the interviewee switching from his use of past tense to the present tense when he speaks about this very moment: "he looks each person in the eyes."

I think the psychology of shame helps us to understand the effect of Hitler's look that many interviewees are still enthused about, even today: the infant's eye, longing to find mirroring eyes, has finally found responding eyes (supposedly). Hitler's public appearances were staged in such a way that every participant subjectively had the illusion that Hitler was looking in his or her own eyes—even though that was objectively impossible (Marks, 2007b).

Ultimately, we came to the following conclusions: the defeat in World War I and the Versailles treaty, the huge debts and wide-spread poverty in the post-war years were experienced as shameful by large parts of the German population.

In addition, 11 million soldiers had returned to Germany in 1918.

This meant that almost all adult German males were war veterans—many of them traumatized by the horrible slaughter at the front. And typically, trauma induces shame.

Even more shame resulted from the fact that millions of Germans had violated the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" Millions had supported the war with their enthusiasm, with war bonds, and with their volunteering for military service. And as we know, violations of our conscience lead to shame.

National Socialism managed to utilize all this shame by offering defences against it—for instance, with a cynical ideology of toughness and disdain for humanistic values ("emotional freezing"). Jews and others were being humiliated, disdained, ridiculed, excluded from the community, turned into numbers, and eradicated. Nazi followers were offered enhancement of their self-esteem with Hitler's look in their eyes: with the belief that they were part of a superior "master-race" (self-idealisation), with

grandiose claims to world domination and promises to restore Germany's honour.

So much for National Socialism: I think the concept of shame can contribute to a better understanding of some aspects of National Socialism.

Now, what happened to all that shame after the end of World War II? Did it simply evaporate? Hardly! Germany had lost another war—and losing is shameful. Millions of Germans were at the front, in war captivity and in bomb-shelters; two million women were raped, and about 14 million were displaced. Trauma causes shame. Even more shame was the consequence of the worst crimes in human history: the Holocaust and the millionfold war crimes committed by Germans.

I want to suggest that all of this shame has “seeped” deeply into today's German society—and the defences against this shame are continuing to latently poison our relationships.

Certainly, Germany has become friendlier during the past decades. Our constitution states in its very first paragraph: “The dignity of man is inviolable.” This is great. However, the dignity of man and woman is being violated every day. Just enter a German Autobahn with a “weak” vehicle: within moments you will receive all kinds of scornful gestures. A French journalist once wrote: “We're not resenting that Germans drive Mercedes; we're resenting the way they are driving Mercedes.”

Shame and its defence are everywhere. It has become such an inherent part of our society that we often don't recognize this legacy. But we see it, for example, when senior citizens are regarded as “scrap metal” (according to Otto Schily, a member of the previous German government); or when the unemployed are described as lazy parasites and garbage; or when the East Germans are regarded as ineffectual bums by West Germans. Teachers, like no other professional group in Germany, are put to shame by the public, by parents, students, and many politicians, such as former Chancellor Helmut Schroeder, who called teachers “lazy dogs.” They are also put to shame by most media; for example, the reputable newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* repeatedly characterised teachers as: “failures, second-rate, fearful, timid, labile, dumb, lazy and sick persons.”

Not only the teachers, but also many children experience humiliation: it has been reported that 80 percent of all children in Germany are beaten by their parents; 10 percent are beaten heavily. It is estimated that around 5 to 10 percent of our children experience sexual abuse. About 20 percent of German children are being bullied by class-mates. And about 30 percent of German pupils are repeatedly humiliated by their teachers; another 30 percent are occasionally humiliated by teachers.

In this way, shame is passed down from generation to generation: from parent to their children, from teachers to students, some of whom will grow up to become teachers themselves. This is like a liquid that is poured from one glass into another, and another, and so on.

Therefore, it is no surprise that German schools are rated rather poorly in international comparisons: how could schools possibly succeed as

long as so many students and teachers are humiliated so much? There have been all kinds of efforts to improve the quality of German schools. There are demands for more money, more evaluations, more innovative teaching techniques. Astonishingly, almost no attention is given to the fact, that for many students and many teachers, school is a place of humiliation. Just one example, observed by one of my university students a few weeks ago: In a sixth grade physical education class, a boy approaches the exercise rather reluctantly. Thereupon the teacher turns to his classmates and says with a loud voice: “Which one of you girls would like to marry such a lame duck?”

What needs to be done? It will probably not suffice if, let’s say, teachers are required to praise their students more often. As long as lifelong learned and internalized patterns of behaviour are not made conscious and changed, old patterns will break through and dictate our actions, especially in stressful times. This may be exemplified by a racist, who might be forced to vocalize “pro-black” sentiments; however, his hatred would still be expressed through his body-language, tone of voice, and attitude.

Therefore, I think we need to do more. I think it will be very fruitful for German society to look closely at shame, to make it a prominent issue, a topic of serious consideration, and to find conscious and constructive ways to deal with it.

This is the reason why I founded a project on Shame, Humiliation, and Dignity (Marks, 2007a). We give seminars, lectures, and workshops for teachers and other professionals, such as theologians, psychotherapists, counsellors, and physicians, who regularly work with people. During these seminars, we inform participants about shame: what it is, how it works, etc. Astonishingly, shame has not been a topic in teachers’ training. And there is practically no literature to be found on the connections between shame, humiliation, dignity, and learning. We are trying to change that.

However, we go one step further: With our seminars, we are offering participants the opportunity to get in touch with their own shame stories, with their memories of shameful moments in their lives. Don’t get me wrong: we do not force participants to expose themselves. Many of these shame stories are definitely private: stories about abuse, violations of intimacy, and the like. These stories do not belong in the public space of a workshop. Yet it is still valuable to be in touch with these memories. So part of the shame work, as I call it, takes place in quiet self-reflection, or recollective journaling, or sharing with a peer.

Yet there are other shame-stories that definitely need to be addressed openly. And many participants are grateful for the opportunity to talk about them. For example: “I feel shame whenever I enter my school building because it looks like a dilapidated factory—and I always wanted to teach young people with dignity.” Another example: “My principal and my colleagues expect me to give distinct ratios of good, average, and bad grades to my students. If I do so, I feel shame, because I’m wronging some of my students. I want to foster all the kids and I think I’m good at that. But as

soon as I give my students the grades they actually deserve, my colleagues banish me as being ‘uncooperative.’” (She is forfeiting belonging).

There is something very moving and healing in this work. Recently, we had a one-day workshop with the teaching staff of a high school. There were about 55 teachers attending. After one hour, an older gentleman raised his hand and said: “When I heard about the title of this workshop, I was very sceptical: “Shame, Humiliation and Dignity”? But listening to you, I just became aware that, when I was a kid, how badly I had to suffer from the humiliations of my teachers. And I also just became aware that I have been repeating such behaviours with my students for decades.”

This is what our work is about: as we get in touch with the shame we once experienced ourselves, let’s say as children at school, we may become able to step out of the repetitive cycle of shame and humiliation. The teacher that I just quoted may not become a “hundred-percent-friendly” teacher overnight. But from this day on, he is aware of what he is doing. He may relapse into his old patterns of teaching and humiliate his students occasionally, perhaps. But now he knows, so he will evolve constructive ways of dealing with his own shame history and develop more appreciative ways of interacting with his students. Shame work has the potential to uncage us, so we do not have to repeat to others what we once had to suffer ourselves.

So we came a long way tonight: I started out by describing the hidden, taboo stories of Nazi-followers. Taboo, because they were connected with immense shame in post-World War II Germany. Interviewing Nazi-bystanders and perpetrators, we trespassed against that taboo—and were confronted with toxic stories that left us, the interviewers, feeling ashamed. As we analysed the interviews, we became aware of the many ways interviewees warded off their shame by ridiculing, belittling, or humiliating the interviewers in open or subtle ways. By analyzing the interviews, we were able to expose a dimension of German society that has been hidden so far: the continuing presence of shame and its effects on today’s German society.

I have also tried to show to you how *unconscious*, defended shame is poisoning our relationships—with humiliation, arrogance, and violence. However, *conscious* shame contains within it the potential for change. As Nobel-prize winning author Orhan Pamuk (2005) writes: “To share one’s hidden shame with others has liberating effects.” This also has tremendous political potential. I am deeply convinced that looking at one’s own shame can open up new possibilities for achieving peace and reconciliation. Let me close with two examples.

Jeff is a friend of mine from Montana. He was born in the late 1940s. In the 1960s he volunteered for the Vietnam War because the “fight for democracy” felt right to him, and participation was expected from him in his environment. In Vietnam he became part of the killings. When he returned to the US, he was accused of being a baby killer, so he forfeited belonging. He was exposed to all of his shame and guilt for what he and his country

had done to the Vietnamese people. Like many other Vietnam veterans, Jeff started to abuse alcohol and his family and came very close to suicide. In a “moment of grace” he did not go through with it, but instead underwent psychotherapy. He started to meet other veterans for sweat-lodges and other occasions to share their stories. Also, he met Soviet veterans of the Afghanistan war. Ultimately, he re-found belonging on the nearby Indian reservation in the circle of Native American veterans, the warrior society.

Jeff became a probation officer and counsellor, helping other veterans to cope with and survive their traumas. Repeatedly he is invited by the local high school to share his story. I had the good fortune to join him there several times. It was very moving to witness the young people listening to Jeff’s story: to see this huge man, who obviously wasn’t a coward or weakling, expressing his shame, guilt, and grief. Certainly Jeff has touched many people’s hearts. He is a role-model for a kind of masculinity beyond emotional freezing, swaggering masculinity, and violence.

Second example: A while ago I was one of the facilitators of a seven-day seminar with participants from Germany, Israel, and Palestine. During the first few days, participants from these three groups were making efforts to get into a dialogue, but were sort of stuck in the opinions they had brought along. The atmosphere in the group was also charged with latent animosities. That changed dramatically once I made shame a topic. On this day, there surfaced an almost overwhelming amount of shame: as the Germans shared their stories about the shame of being German, as the Israelis shared their shame stories, and the Palestinians shared their shame stories. The day ended with a profound emotional connection among all of us. We found common ground because shame is something we all know: it is universal.

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