



## HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE

### A PILGRIMAGE OF REPAIR

**Colum McCann**

Almost a hundred years ago, a series of letters went back and forth between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. Einstein, the scientist, “the father of relativity,” was interested in the Theory of Everything. And Freud, known as the “father of psychoanalysis,” was interested in exploring the brain and the body.

Together Einstein and Freud were the bellweather minds of their times. But a curtain of darkness had descended. Europe had emerged from one devastating war and, although the eminent scientists didn’t know it for certain, the world seemed on the cusp of another disaster.

Einstein wanted to explore humanity’s “lust for hatred” and so he wrote to Freud to ask him if he thought it might be possible to “guide the psychological development of man so that it can become resistant to the psychoses of hate and destruction, thereby delivering civilisation from the menace of war?”

A big, brave question. How might we deliver civilisation from the rubble of war, and perhaps even cultivate the idea of a world peace?

When Freud eventually replied, he told Einstein that, sadly, all his life he had been telling people truths that were difficult to swallow. In his opinion there was very little likelihood of humankind being able to counteract the vast evils of war. Humanity, he said, has always had an active instinct for hatred and destruction, and it would not, in his opinion, be ever possible to eradicate it.

Still, there was a crack of light. Ending war might be impossible in the absolute, but standing up against it, and fighting for peace and justice, was not impossible. “*Anything,*” Freud said, “*anything that creates emotional ties between human beings must inevitably counteract war.*” What should be sought by humanity, said Freud, was “*a community of feeling,*” and “*a mythology of the instincts.*”

*A community of feeling. A mythology of the instincts ....* what we might simply call today... a story or a parable.

---

We live in the most and least human of times. On the one hand, we have made spectacular leaps forward in science, medicine, art and technology. We have instant access to one another. We can recognise the textures of other lives from great distances. Our phones work. Our switches work. Our taps work. Our satellites work. Our medicines work. The machines of our lives blink on and off constantly.

Yet, on the other hand -- and at the exact same time -- we are living through an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. Often we refuse to listen to one another. Our curtains get drawn. Our

windows get closed. We create divides between us. We refuse to cross the street to help one another. We remain rooted in our own narrow canals of certainty. We tumble into the anonymity of our machines. The tiny spaces that exist between one another grow wider with every tick of the clock.

The tension stretches the endpoints. It stretches ... and stretches ... until the snap occurs.

The times break.

Almost a whole century on from Einstein and Freud, we are still asking ourselves the same questions: How do we avoid the wars that threaten to annihilate us? How do we counteract the effects of climate change? How do we ease the great geographic pressures of migration? How can we deal with issues of identity and belonging? How can we recognise one another across the increasing divides? How can we use our undoubted brilliance – our technology, our medicine, our artificial intelligence, our faith – to communicate with one another?

If the world is built of molecules and atoms, it is also built of stories.

The least distance between any of us is not a millimeter or even a picometer ... it is a story. This is how we find one another. Our lives touch. Our ideas touch. We spin off one another. We create new energy. The quarks of our experience make new building blocks. We cast a wide net of understanding. The world becomes more deeply patterned. Stories matter. They can change the course of history. They can rescue us. Stories are the glue that hold us together: we are nothing if we can't communicate.

This is even more applicable when we get a chance to understand the stories of those who are seemingly different and distant to us. We stop. We listen. We become bigger than ourselves. The world is, in fact, made of the stories of others, even those we don't know, and maybe in particular of those we don't know, or don't yet know.

Who can deny the humanity of the person when you have just heard his or her story? Who can slam a missile into a marketplace when you know the story of the woman who owns the fruit stand? Who can allow their politicians to refuse an emergency food truck into a warzone when you have heard the story of the child lying wasting away in the darkness? Who can close the border gate on the wheelchair-bound boy who is travelling for lifesaving treatment?

Let us ask ourselves that question. Who? Who? Who? And then let us pause another moment to answer.

The brutal and unfortunate truth is that, in today's world, increasing numbers of us can.

---

The crux of our contemporary dilemma is not so much silence, as it is the act of silencing. When we refuse to listen to the stories of others, or more poignantly, when we refuse to let others tell their stories at all, or yet even more poignantly still, when we *annihilate* the stories of others, the world becomes a spectacle of narrowness. Our refusal to step beyond ourselves, or at least those who don't look like us, or sound like us, or vote like us, is at the core of our possible doom. This dangerous tightening has the capability to shutting us entirely down. Like an artery that becomes blocked, we cut off our life-blood. The heart surrenders. We must retreat into the jail of self. We cannot love our neighbour anymore because we have no neighbour but ourselves. And when we have no neighbour but ourselves, we have no meaning beyond the solipsistic gaze.

Who are we if we are only ourselves? We become the emptiness that we fear. We allow great crimes – the destruction of the environment, the annihilation of our neighbours, the proliferation of poverty – to occur. We wire ourselves for meaninglessness.

If we – as a government, or a corporation, or a church, or as a community– can deny another person their story, we can deny their very existence. This is a powerful and insidious weapon. It can sow fear. It can isolate. It can dehumanize. Fear sells. Ignorance sells. Hatred – because of fear and ignorance – takes a foothold. Lies abound. Rumours abound. Gossip abounds. A story denied is not made equal by a lie told. This is where the imbalance of power comes in. Power is well aware that if you own – and indeed limit -- the story of others, you own everything, even the person themselves. The true story of our neighbours – nuanced and contradictory and intensely human – gets lost. The truth is handcuffed. And then imprisoned.

Without a story, the proximity, and even the very existence of others, is annihilated. It happens publicly in many places: Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, but it also happens closer to home, deep within our own hearts.

The nullification of the stories of our supposed enemies, who are really just our neighbours, is one of the world's most insidious weapons. Our lack of access to the nuanced and meaningful stories of others, along with the refusal to create places where we can listen, is one of the greatest dangers in the world today.

---

If we live in broken times, then the new theme must be repair. How do we repair what is so obviously broken? Einstein's opinion was that some healing would come in the form of world government. Out of this, organisations like the United Nations were born. His idea was that our world leaders would be able to guide us towards some sort of coherence, but it has not worked as well as we would have wanted. Yes, much good has come from these global bodies, but we still find ourselves at the deepening coalface of doom.

The approach in decades gone by has been to treat power “top down.” Our leaders pressed their ideas from above. Decisions were made at the highest level and filtered down through a hierarchical structure. At the time, and still today, it was usually assumed that our leaders had our best interest in minds.

But we live now in an age that recognises the principle of emergence. The theory of emergence states that a multitude of any number of tiny things – neurons, bacteria, ants, people – can exhibit properties way beyond the capability of any one individual. Flocking birds can display emergent qualities, wheeling across the sky in seamless formations, for example. Honeybees become so much more startling when they work in unison. Groups of people can possess intelligence – or indeed stupidity -- far greater than the sum of their parts.

Story-telling too, can exhibit the possibility of emergence and, in this fractious day and age, sharing our stories – alongside listening to the stories of others – might be one of the few things that can save us.

Storytelling is a call to action. Storylistening is a form of prayer.

At Narrative 4, a global non-profit organization which empowers young people to create change through storytelling and storylistening, we have found a simple formula to initiate change. *You tell my story, I tell yours.* In the first person. Face to face. Not a didactic story, but a personal story. Not something designed to win an argument, but something that stirs the soul. A parable, if you will. Something that accesses the truth without being declarative. Something that is humble. Something that bows its head. Something – or rather, someone -- who listens. We have run the Narrative 4 program in Ireland, Mexico, the United States, Nigeria, South Africa, and dozens of other countries around the world.

It begins in our classrooms, because what happens in our classrooms happens for the rest of our lives, and then it moves from the classrooms outward, across the city, across the country, across

the oceans, building a latticework of connection. Young people soon realise – through personal story-telling – that we are so much more alike than we are different. In doing this, we dwell not only in another person’s story, but we hear our own being told back to us, and in the process – this simple, but astounding process – we recognise one another’s common humanity.

In his message for the 54<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day, Pope Francis wrote: Amid the cacophony of voices and messages that surround us, we need a human story that can speak of ourselves and of the beauty all around us. A narrative that can regard our world and its happenings with a tender gaze. A narrative that can tell us that we are part of a living and interconnected tapestry. A narrative that can reveal the interweaving of the threads which connect us to one another.”

The act of listening and talking bolsters our very notions of peace, equality, democracy and understanding. Stories can lead to action which can lead to change. Rather than being applied from the top down, it is gathered from underneath. Even if we disagree with one another. Even if we live across a border. Even if we have vastly different histories. Even, in fact, if we dislike one another.

I have been blessed to have the chance to write about two fathers, one Israeli, one Palestinian, Rami Elhanan and Bassam Aramin. Despite losing their daughters in separate incidents in the conflict, they have become good friends, and even more startling they have maintained that friendship. They travel the world together, sharing their stories. Their philosophy is simple and profound: *We don't have to love one another. In fact, we don't even have to like one another. But we must, must, must understand one another, or else we are doomed.*

And so they continue to travel. And they continue to tell their stories.

They have become pilgrims of hope.

It is a task that belongs to all of us –scholars, writers, mechanics, students, clerics, housekeepers - - but in particular it belongs to our teachers and our journalists who are uniquely positioned to guide this new principle of emergence. Amongst the “pilgrims of hope” that we salute here today, the teachers and our journalists and the communicators are the ones who guide us so much of the way. They are uniquely positioned to help tell the stories of others. They understand that for a story to be told it must be properly listened to. Those stories, and the understanding of others, can go outside the classroom, outside the newsroom, across the street, across the city, across the country, across the oceans, from continent to continent.

This, then, becomes a pilgrimage of repair.

*A community of feeling. A mythology of the instincts.*

As pilgrims, we bow our heads on the rocky road and we move on, carrying our humanity, and the humanity of others, from one place to the next.

If all of this has the air of a clarion call, so be it: it *is* a clarion call. We live in dangerous times. We cannot afford to ignore the stories of others. Will storytelling and storylistening save the world? Possibly, and possibly not ... but it will certainly, at the very least, allow a ray of light and understanding. And where there is one ray of light, there is the possibility of many more, collaborating, working together, until at least a portion of the darkness is pierced.

Simply – at first – being interested in one another is a triumph. Imagine how many triumphs come about when we learn to understand, or even like, or maybe even love, one another. Ordinary people. With our extraordinary stories. And our ability to connect.

The shortest distance between being an enemy or a neighbour is a story.

The cynics will say that we are wrong. They will say that we are naïve and sentimental. But, on the contrary, perhaps it is naïve and sentimental to refuse hope? Cynics live in the clouds of their

own understanding. They refuse to take a pilgrimage to elsewhere. They stay where they are. They close the curtains. They shut down the GPS on their own imaginations.

Does this mean that we should isolate the cynics and pass them along the way? No, of course not. On the contrary, we must embrace them with hope. Listen to them. Bow our heads. Share our stories. Listen to theirs. Find common ground. And then move on in the hope that we have left some healing behind.

In this exponential age, as the brokenness multiplies, the fundamental essence of repair is that we need to know one another. To know one another, we need to listen, we need to communicate. After listening, we need to understand. Then, respectfully and joyfully and courageously, we can begin to initiate change.

May the Lord bless you and save you all.

Mile buiochas.