

# Everything Old is New Again: Storytelling and Dialogue as Tools for Community Change in Mississippi

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“We don’t know each other. And because we don’t know each other, we don’t trust each other.”<sup>1</sup> This candid utterance, shared by an African American community leader in the Mississippi Delta in a small, biracial community meeting in 2007, describes the chasm that prevents justice and inclusion even 50 years after the Civil Rights movement. What might we accomplish if we were able to know each other? Linguistic anthropologists suggest that language itself was born in the first circles around campfires, in our desire to share who we are with each other. Thus, human kinship and communication grew from our interactions; we are meant to tell each other stories.

Storytelling can create positive social change. Indeed, as noted by scholar Rickie Solinger, “the twenty-first century is a historical moment in which narrative is more broadly recognized than ever as a significant, simple, crucial vehicle for reawakening, disseminating, and sustaining social justice impulses.”<sup>2</sup> Narrative accounts describe better social interaction and governance where the approach has been used.

Although sometimes considered too subjective or impressionistic for serious political or judicial proceedings (after all, people sitting around in a circle reading and listening to stories and poetry doesn’t sound like the typical mode of post-conflict reconciliation, community organizing, or transitional justice) the effectiveness of this approach has now been widely recognized and a number of organizations world-wide have recently adopted this approach. There are sound reasons for this tactical shift: a recognition and appreciation of the historical and transcultural precedents for using stories to teach skills necessary to build and maintain community; and recent breakthroughs in brain science research that

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Riley of Greenwood, Mississippi. Unpublished interview by author, 7 December 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani, eds., “Introduction,” in *Telling Stories to Change the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

seem to indicate that the human mind is structured to process information more readily in the form of stories. Facts do not persuade us; stories do. Thus storytelling has become an integral part of transitional justice to mend individuals and communities torn apart by structural violence.

Over 30 countries have created truth commissions to investigate human rights abuses and to make recommendations about justice and reconciliation. The Network for Human Rights Documentation-Burma posits that, “Truth commissions are nonjudicial, independent panels of inquiry typically set up to establish the facts and context of serious violations of human rights or of international humanitarian law in a country’s past. The commissions’ members are usually empowered to conduct research, support victims and propose policy recommendations to prevent recurrence of crimes. Through their investigations, the commissions may aim to discover and learn more about past abuses . . . [and] may aim to prepare the way for prosecutions and recommend institutional reforms. Most commissions focus on victims’ needs as a path toward reconciliation and reducing conflict over the past.”<sup>3</sup>

Based at the University of Mississippi, the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation employs a narrative model of community outreach and change, training and encouraging people to honestly engage in their history in order to live more truthfully in the present. One aspect of our work has been the effort to establish a Truth Commission in Mississippi to address the legacy of racial violence and segregation. While most TRCs have been established in countries transitioning from authoritarian governments to democracies, we believe it could be a useful tool enabling the world’s oldest democracy to live out the true meaning of its creed. Only one truth commission has been successfully implemented in the United States - in Greensboro, North Carolina - and it faced great hurdles. In fact, TRC processes have been fraught wherever they have been attempted and in our efforts to create a truth commission in Mississippi, we have strived to learn the lessons and best practices of others’ experiences in order to create a more sustainable and just process.

Rev. Peter Storey, one of the architects of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, advised us that while many have charged his country’s TRC with failure, he believes that instead, “the country failed the

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.nd-burma.org/documentation/other-resources/itemlist/user/62-networkforhumanrightsdokumentationburma.html?start=30>. Accessed July 2, 2014.

TRC.”<sup>4</sup> He advised us to drill down as deeply into communities as possible, to think about the ordinary, the quotidian. Too often, practitioners of healing have been distracted by the larger historical and political context, by the enormity of the crimes. But such a broad focus misses the microaggressions, the bystanderism, the attitudes and activities of everyday people to create everyday experience. Thus the focus on the social system fails to hold individuals accountable on a day-to-day basis for activities that cumulatively escalate to the totality. A general discourse about race and racism alleviates responsibility the specific hateful speech acts that constitute one’s lived reality.

Our attempts to create a Mississippi TRC have already yielded some general lessons for establishing a truth commission within a democratic context. For the particular context of the United States, given the ingrained history and absence of broad systemic change, truth commissions must be deconstructed to their component parts and implemented as simultaneous tools in a truth process tool kit. In short, we argue that truth processes must be defined for each country’s sociopolitical context and may include “rituals of atonement,” changing the geography of memory with historical tours and markers, the creation and implementation of school curriculum and community development, changing the narratives of communities known for violence by using oral history and storytelling, and creating partnerships of advocacy and policy groups to seek new institutional reforms that undo the structures of oppression and replace them with equitable ones.

In 2004, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a multiracial group of citizens used stories to find consensus around the forty-year old murders of three civil rights workers there, an event which had long marked the community as aberrant and beyond redemption for harboring murderers. Through stories, whites learned that blacks did not hold all whites accountable for the murders. And blacks learned that whites cared about the lives of the three young men but were afraid of the Klan as well. Their new unity, forged through shared narratives, enabled the group to call for justice in the murders and led to the first state prosecution in the case.

With that foundation of justice, the community has been able to integrate Little League sports, to reorder the way that public funds are spent in all neighborhoods, and to elect, in a majority white town, its first black mayor.

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<sup>4</sup> Reverend Peter Storey, Simon’s Town, South Africa. Unpublished interview by author. 12 December 2009.

Through stories, young people in the Philadelphia School System are finding ways to make different choices; in open and honest conversations through peer-to-peer interaction, the students themselves have greatly diminished one of the top ten pregnancy rates in the state.

And the story of Philadelphia has rippled across the state. In McComb, through oral histories that lifted up long-hidden stories, a school system learned that it had banished children who stood up for their civil rights. It welcomed back those heroes in 2006 and awarded them diplomas, forty years later. Now, students in local culture classes conduct oral histories each semester, adding to a body of knowledge about their community that is transforming school curriculum there. Their test scores have increased and their drop-out rates have decreased.

In Tallahatchie County, silence hovered over the community that let the murderers of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till go free in 1955. But news that Philadelphia had engaged with its own history emboldened citizens in Sumner. Through often painful stories and oral history, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission came to apologize for the miscarriage of justice in the Till case in 2007 and has now changed the geography of memory there, with civil rights markers at each significant site related to the Till case and a new civil rights museum in the courthouse where killers were once allowed to go free.

In July, 2013, in Oxford, Mississippi, a pastor learned that his historically white and prominent church had voted to keep blacks out of its institution in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King. Though initially skeptical of the power of stories, this courageous leader created spaces for church members to engage and reflect and eventually to offer confession and apology to its black neighbors for its exclusive and destructive 1968 policy and all of the quotidian ways in which it implemented that policy of separation over decades. Offering forgiveness, black churches are now encouraging partnership to address the poverty in Oxford, hidden beneath a patina of parties and privilege.

Oral history, storytelling and dialogue offer new tools for conflict transformation and community change through trust-building and relationships that are now understood as necessary precursors to organizing and policy reforms. In a culture that prefers the “thingification” of people, as Martin Luther King called it, over celebrations of dignity and common cause, courageous community leaders are engaged in a “citizen insurgency,” demanding connection and positive change amidst rampant consumerism, separation and injustice.

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By recovering these memories and stories, advocates can work more effectively to teach about “microprogressions,” as our colleague Jennifer Stollman has called them, or the everyday actions the collectively create a more just and inclusive society. We believe this approach more effectively enables ordinary people to understand their roles as change agents in their own communities.

Thus, where Michael Ignatieff has argued that the main contribution of truth commissions has been to “limit the range of permissible lies,” we offer as an improvement the deconstructed and more multifaceted truth process approach which, as our colleague Charles Tucker has described, “increases the range of voices of those who are deemed credible enough to tell the truth.” In support of this work, we offer our community process, “The Welcome Table,” which creates civil and respectful spaces to consider the “everydayness” of oppression and healing, which is then infused with community building and structural reforms to more effectively ensure that oppressive histories do not repeat themselves.

For more information on this work in Mississippi, see [www.winterinstitute.org](http://www.winterinstitute.org)