

Narrative as New Reality: A Memoirist Responds to Robert Hunt, by Bryan Parys

What is remembered is what becomes reality. – Patricia Hampl

First off, I'm a memoirist. I've been invited to respond to Robert Hunt's "Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue," distinctly because I am not a theologian, but a crafter and student of narrative. Or, better yet, the art of narrative—meaning there is an act of creation necessary when humans engage in the parsing and ultimate sharing of narratives.

In his essay, Hunt purports that a deeper understanding of narratives will allow for more substantial, bridge-building dialogue between Muslims and Christians (he specifies that "Christian" is just one lens here, and that the narrative approach to dialogue could and should work for any non-Muslim group). As he explicitly says, "It is the thesis of this paper that understanding Muslim (and Christian) identity in terms of narrative will provide a more illuminating and fruitful basis for engaging in interfaith dialogue..." (Hunt *supra*).

Narrative, however, is a world of a word. It is not only a chronicling of where we come from, but also who we are because of our claimed origins, and what drives our passion. One's own narrative starts with the self and, from there continuously enters a labyrinthine layering of subsequent narratives—of our parents, our ethnicity, our friend group, our gastronomic sensibility, our faith, our heroes. In other words, humans are a jumbled tome of inexorable narratives, emphasis on that plural. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to understand how Hunt is using this loaded term, which he does by stating, "In the paper *narrative* means simply a way of describing the origins of Islam as a religious movement, the 'plot' which characterizes its engagement with the non-Muslim world, and the end toward which it is understood to move" (Hunt).

In essence, Hunt is looking at the Muslim world in terms of its *historical* narrative. His use of "simply," becomes anything but simple, in that he is seeking (in 18 pages no less) to find a narrative that is at once specific as well as covers the current Muslim mindset. To this end, Hunt is extremely illuminating (especially for this non-seminarian). But, some further grounding could help offer a more concrete how-to blueprint.

I want to offer some further thoughts on narrative, and in so doing, hope to bring elements of Hunt's abstract instructions to a level of personal engagement. That is, I speak of sharing not just our communal narrative, but our personal narratives, for the self is the only place that dialogue may start, and it is the sharing of self that is the only place dialogue can survive.

In, *I Could Tell You Stories*, her classic essay collection on the craft of writing, the memoirist Patricia Hampl writes in the chapter "Memory and Imagination," that neglecting our personal histories is to become vulnerable to control: "If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone will do it for us. That is the scary political fact" (Hampl 1999).

Here, she suggests that politics and the art of memoir are connected. I want to further this assertion into the realm of interfaith dialogue. While it remains true, like it

or not, that we are ambassadors of the tradition we ascribe to, we are first and foremost beings with memories—this is the great equalizer. You cannot boil our essence down any further than this. At this level, there is no agenda to impose *Shari'a*, there is no angling for a “Christian” nation, nor any other large-scale religious endgame. There is just biology—synapses firing, neural pathways, and feet trying to move forward.

From this juncture, Hampl suggests that the next level of humanity is the desire to talk to each other about “the big issues.” And while the transmission of this desire to speak of big things often results in the stalemates that Hunt speaks of, the genesis of this desire is to connect. Violently forcing one’s views on another, in this light, is a misguided take on that desire to connect, in that it sees assimilation as the only means of relational community.

The only possibilities regarding interfaith dialogue are whether to move up the narrative ladder in a connective or disjunctive manner.

The best way to be connective then, is to own the fact that we are saturated in Story, and never cease looking for others with whom to exchange these stories. And while Hampl is speaking specifically of the craft of writing within the memoir genre, it is easy to extend this into our purposes at hand here. As she says:

“Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience.... You tell me your story, I’ll tell you mine” (Hampl 1999, 32.)

So, all this talk about “art” and “memoir” is actually not as cloistered as it seems. Art is just a means of turning the interior life into the exterior, and memoir¹ uses memory as its medium. In this way, we must all seek to be memoirists—owners of our stories—if we ever hope to speak of those “big issues” and still progress as a global culture. There is much at stake here. If we give up our right to owning and crafting our pasts—on the micro and macro level—than our pasts become the plaything of authorities, for good and for ill. Hampl writes,

“[Memory]...is an efficient way of controlling masses of people. It doesn’t even require much bloodshed, as long as people are entirely willing to give over their personal memories. Whole histories can be rewritten. The books which now seek to deny the existence of the Nazi death camps now fill a room” (Hampl 1999, 32).

To conclude, I will give you a part of my narrative. I grew up in a nondenominational, Evangelical Christian context in the lake-swaddled city of Laconia, New Hampshire. My Christian school’s mascot was, and is still “The Crusader.” It wasn’t until college that I learned how detestable the moniker was. I wondered what the Jewish people in our city thought of when they saw write-ups in the sport section on how “Crusaders slaughter Eagles in Basketball Playoffs.”

In choosing this mascot, our school was surely not trying to proudly display one of our history’s most solipsistic and bloodied takes on sharing our beliefs.

But, we still did, and I am culpable to a degree.

I share this because I am seeking to use my experience as something that is both real and symbolic. This is my memory, but in parsing it with you, its original truth does not become my identity. This memory now belongs to you in part, and from here, we have the capacity to choose to reach an understanding—a new reality—and move forward.

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Notes

¹ In fact, the Indo-European root of the word “memoir” is *mer-mer* and means “to vividly wonder” and is anything but its cliché criticism, navel-gazing.