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Study Abroad Research Context

My experience in South Africa provided me with a more culturally-sensitive foundation on which I could more confidently draw conclusions. I had access to rare sources in the local library and was able to interview locals about the region's history and folklore. I was able to research in the archives of a local newspaper and search through old textbooks and scholarly journals that I would otherwise have been unable to access. Daily interactions with members of my host family as well as with friends and acquaintances allowed me a more general sense of the legitimacy of my research interests within the context of the culture I was to comment on. But being abroad not only enhanced my research; it also influenced my research. The difficulties the children faced led me directly to the question: With all that is detrimental in their lives, what can be done here and now to help them secure a brighter future for themselves? My volunteer work at the children's home became the practical complement to my academic interests. There I could try each of the concepts and theories I read about with the children and observe their responses.

One-third of South Africa's blacks still live in the townships that apartheid created to keep them out of the wealthy white population's sight and mind. The difficult social factors inherent in the lingering system of apartheid threaten constantly to exile a portion of South Africa's black youth to the country's margins. AIDS, tuberculosis, rape and other acts of violence, as well as the debilitating effects of extreme poverty, are among a host of plagues that riddle any given township and assault the human dignity of its inhabitants. Pulled from this context of suffering were the sixty-three children of Daily Bread's Children's Home in East London, South Africa, with whom I interacted with as a teacher, fundraiser and friend. These children were victims of particularly brutal histories as street kids, AIDS orphans, traumatized

witnesses to horrendous acts of violence, pregnant teens, or as youths from either abusive or neglectful homes, or simply from homes incapable of providing adequate care for their members.

Despite the resiliency of these youths, the real and relative effects (any needs they have are intensified by the nearby presence of affluent communities) of their marginalization are constant hindrances to their physical and mental well-being. The organization that undertakes to support the children is severely under-funded, understaffed and, as a result, drastically under-equipped to address the complex challenges of its children. While South Africa's political and economic difficulties perpetuate the absence of needed funding and faculty, it became clear to me that a more immediate remedy to some of their problems was possible through carefully planned discussion and expression. Both of these could be facilitated by literature, through both written texts and spoken stories of the rich oral tradition of the Xhosa tribe, and through the personal narratives of the children. I explored the capacity of literature to provide, or at least promote reconciliation for the children at Daily Bread through instructive lessons, games and other activities.

I based my research on several fundamental questions such as: To what extent can literature provide reconciliation for an individual, and what factors still remain in the realm of the physical/financial? How does the reconciliatory power of literature help children accept and affirm their lives despite such harsh realities? What role does language play in the healing process as previously unarticulated personal histories are expressed orally or in writing? How does narrative understanding and communication of painful events empower the children to become agents in their own histories as well as their futures? To address these questions, I struggled to create a space between the insider perspectives I report in my research and my inevitable outsider status, owing to my race, class, and culture.

Telling Stories: Past and Present Heroes[†]

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us.”

—*Joseph Campbell*

Among the Xhosa tribe in South Africa storytelling is a magnificent art. But these stories are more than mere entertainment. Xhosa scholar Harold Scheub says story-telling for the Xhosa people is “not only a primary means of entertainment and artistic expression in the society, it is also the major educational device...” (*Ntsomi* 88). Beyond education, the stories’ most important role is to allow expression. With the recent demise of apartheid and some of its effects lingering on, the need for expression about past sorrows through stories is greater than ever before. Upon investigation, these stories yield profound insights into the Xhosa’s racial identity and perception of self. For both the individual and the culture generally these stories and their heroes demonstrate their own significant roles in providing reconciliation and healing for the youth of South Africa.

I n d i v i d u a l

Stories provide a common cultural heritage that has long been one important element of the unifying force for Xhosa that resisted the divisive powers of apartheid. More importantly, the stories provide a wealth of role models and friends that see troubled individuals through difficult and otherwise lonely lives, showing them the way to ultimate healing. The challenges for poor black children in South Africa today are many. Those I taught at Daily Bread Children’s Home were AIDS orphans, abuse victims, street kids, or kids from financially destitute homes. Some were traumatized from witnessing violent beatings and murders; others were trying to come to terms at the beginning of their lives with the disease that would soon end them; a few felt humiliation for their young pregnancies; all suffered from being marginalized in society and restricted to the small, impoverished farm. Yet they consistently demonstrated amazing resilience. They all cared for each other in the enormous family of seventy or so that they had become. They knew each other intimately and accepted each other completely. But where did this come from, this courage and hope? When I investigated where that support and inner strength came from I found, as I had expected, that their

[†]*Editor’s Note:* Colin’s contribution to *Frontiers* takes the form of two shorter papers, which together best reflect his study abroad research.

heroes and role models taught them in a variety of ways to hold their chin up, as it were. But also I was surprised to find that the telling of those stories was just as important, if not more so, than the heroes themselves.

In an early discussion about heroes I asked the students to write down who their hero was and why. I was touched to read one of the ninth-graders' response: "My hero is Haggan. Why is because he knows my story and I know his." When I asked him who Haggan was after class he told me it was his grandfather's grandfather. The story of that man's difficult life generations back had survived to support and sustain his great-great grandson, whom he never knew, but who felt deeply that he knew him.

Realizing how important heroes were to the children, I prepared more lessons and games that focused on them and facilitated discussion of their problems and fears and how their heroes could help them. They told me stories of their past ancestors while I taught them about the heroes in the struggle against apartheid. Little time had to pass before I realized the authentically profound power the children found in linking their hardships to those of their ancestors. But the fact that they were able to express themselves through the stories strengthened them perhaps even more.

"Narrative understanding is our most primitive form of explanation. We make sense of things by fitting them into stories. When events fall into a pattern we can describe in a way that is satisfying as narrative, then we think that we have some grasp of why they occurred" (Krog 261). When stories are told that give voice to the repressed and ignored, it is powerful. In her book *Country of My Skull*, Krog, a journalist, notices what I also found as a teacher: the need to relate narratives of suffering is contagious. She says all the people who hear those narratives must "tell stories not to die of life" (64). And it wasn't long before I caught the need to tell stories myself. I found myself writing for hours in my journal each night after I returned from the school. I could not handle the culminating weight of the painful narratives I would hear about the students, whether from them or the teachers, without removing it onto the page. From my first exposure to the specifics of each of the children's own record their respective brutal histories I found myself impatient to write at length about the things I experienced, not being able to really relax or rest until I did so.

I soon noticed as well that telling these stories restored a sense of dignity to the children. By telling their own accounts of how they felt victimized, they purged their own past. The simple act of speaking about those events has cultural relevance to the prominence of story-telling among the Xhosa. As previously mentioned, great value continues to be linked with oral tradition. But it is

important to remember, as scholar Sanders says, that “what is important is not so much what is told...but rather that telling occurs” (18). Thus the historical truth of the stories and their prominence within the culture generally become irrelevant next to the promises of being able to speak unchecked and undoubted. Hearing those testimonies, even if only in the privacy of a schoolroom on a secluded farm, is still “the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission qtd. in Sanders 20).

Though he or she never forgets the trauma experienced, the empowered victim sees him or herself as having absolute control and decision in her well-being. A man who was dismembered by a bomb sent to him in the mail exemplifies this movingly: I do not see myself as a victim, but as a survivor of apartheid...I am not captured by hatred, because then they would not only have destroyed my body, but also my soul ...Ironically, even without hands and an eye, I am much more free than the person who did this to me...I say to everyone who supported apartheid, “Your freedom is waiting for you...but you will have to go through the whole process.” (*Krog* 177)

My friend Lindile also exemplifies this. When he was twelve he was assaulted by hired mercenaries for speaking out against the corruption at Daily Bread. Twenty men came to the farm in uniforms with knight-sticks in their hands. They assaulted over fifteen defenseless children and left them bleeding and crying on the ground. But Lindile smiles about it now, saying, “I’ve told that story so much and now I know that on that day those who were the most wounded were those mercenaries” (Interview). The mercenaries had surrendered their humanity, and in so doing were the worst off. But beyond the therapeutic purging achieved through actually telling the stories, there is moral strength gained from the heroes of past myths.

Underneath the act of telling itself, the hero is the central interest of all Xhosa tales. He or she consistently embodies the benefits of overcoming suffering. Scheub says, “The hero is... a man who distinguishes himself by deeds of daring and bravery” but one who also “destroys evil by means of his valor and wit, affirming the natural order by accepting [it] as valid” (*World* 86). In the stories the natural order seems to be one of serious trials, but of greater rewards, and by accepting that order the hero helps people understand how to enjoy life despite its terrors. His or her goal is “to enlarge the pupil of the eye, so that the *body* with its attendant personality will no longer obstruct the view” (*Campbell* 189). In other words the hero teaches the purposes and promises of suffering. The rewards can be greater than the pains.

“Suffering takes a man from known places to unknown places. Without suffering you are not a man. You will never suffer for the second time because you have learned to suffer,” author Joel Matlou writes (87). The hero’s path has as its first threshold that of suffering. All the insights and remedies that he gains come because he has crossed that threshold of pain. The greatness he achieves for himself and his people dwarfs whatever troubles he has had to endure. “The powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades” (Campbell 82). The trials of life then can be more hopefully regarded as the price to pay for wisdom and happiness.

Suffering also teaches empathy. People’s shared life experiences together forge communities that are sensitive to the bad and good that befalls its members. Writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba says “What is suffered by another man in view of my eyes is suffered also by me. The grief he knows is a grief I know. Out of the same bitter cup do we drink. To the same chain-gang do we belong” (94). Andisiwe, a girl in the eighth grade, spoke often about the lessons she learned from the past, or as she called them: “the things our ancestors have for us.” She explained that her predecessors held valuable lessons for her on how to endure hardship well:

There was not much food before because the whites had pushed all of us onto small little lands that was dry and not good for growing food that they needed; and then they were separated and alone. So they said, “Either we can stay hungry or we can get together and share what we have and see if it is not much for us.” So they all moved close to each other and made farms and shared their food and houses with each other. Things weren’t so bad after all, they just had to be close and it was a happy time. (Interview)

By viewing how suffering can bring people together, when they respond appropriately (at the same time qualifying as heroes) it is appropriate now to consider story-telling’s importance more generally, and the role heroes have in reconciling an entire culture.

Culture

In a myth called “Keepers of the Flame” (Ford 18) that is prevalent across the entire continent of Africa, Africans are identified as the ones who maintain the flame of humanity and common charity as a natural result of the creation. The gods call the monkey, bird, and the black and white man together to give them the four gifts of the creation. The gifts are food, water, books, and fire. The monkey and the bird make off with the food and the water. The gods give

the black man the flame and charge him with the responsibility to be its keeper. The white man is pleased to have the books, but when the lights go out and he is alone, the black man draws near him to help him see. It is significant to remember that this myth was transmitted through all the generations under the apartheid regime to survive today, encouraging at least symbolically the reunion of black and white. Yet in a more detailed description and analysis of another myth we see one instance of how black South Africans were taught to react when confronted by hatred, oppression, and objectification.

In a tale that originated in southern Africa called “The Maidens of Bhakubha” (Jordan 71–107) a terrible monster comes to haunt the small village of Bhakubha, where things have long been peaceful. Unaware of the monster, the princess and her attending friends and maidens disregard cultural rules and go down to the forbidden waters. There they undress, leaving their clothes on the shores of the lake. They swim and play naked in the water, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. As the day closes, they sense their absence in the village will be noticed and they decide it best to head home. The princess, however, will not be entreated. She wants to enjoy her time with her friends and persuades them to stay a little longer. They remain until it gets so late that all finally agree they should leave. As they climb out of the lake onto the shore they are terrified to see a huge slimy monster lying across their clothes.

The foremost girl sings to the monster to give her back her clothes. The monster looks up and down with an evil smile at her naked body during the song, and after she finishes he hands over her clothes. All of the maidens decide to do the same, entreating the monster with their lovely singing voices and exposing their naked bodies to his gruesome eyes. But when it was the princess’s turn she stood back stubborn and proud, refusing to be eyed by the monster.

“Come forward and sing, Nomtha-we-Langa,’ called the other girls” (78). The princess yells back, “What! Beg for my clothes from this ugly monster? How dare he lay his loathsome belly on the clothes of the maidens of Bhakubha?” She then marches in front of the monster making an ugly face and singing deliberately in a husky voice “and showed her defiance and contempt by rejecting the words of persuasion sung by the other girls.” The monster quickly lunges forward and bites her on the thigh, which causes her head to transform into the same head as the monster. Her maidens flee in terror and the princess, ashamed to return to her village, must to live in the woods with the monster.

A long time passes before anyone ever hears from the princess again. Then one day her brother hears her singing in the trees and decides to confront the monster and defeat him so that his sister can return to her old form and be

allowed to go home. He goes swimming in the lake, hoping to find the monster lying across his clothes when he came back to shore, but is disappointed when the monster fails to appear. Despite the pleadings of his parents, he continues to seek the opportunity to confront the monster, which he finally does. Helped by his closest friends, he slays the monster and finds the princess hiding in the back of his chamber. They all return home to the cheers and applause of the king and his court. The prince receives special congratulations from the chief counselor: “All of your fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers at this meeting envy you this great deed. Even if they don’t say it to you, in their hearts they are asking themselves at this very moment if, given such an opportunity, in their youth, any of their age-groups would have been able to display their manhood in such a worthy manner” (106).

The princess, now transformed back to her original appearance, is reunited with her dear friends after many years of shame. They rejoice to be with each other again. Soon they are all married to the noble warriors who slew the monster and saved the princess. The princess and her husband open the ford that leads to the forbidden waters and the great river that results sweeps away all the old water. All the maidens and their husbands cross the river one after another into immortality.

This tale is a powerful lesson on how to handle antagonism from violent intruders: confrontation is the key to success. Though the first to resist was sure to endure violence, pain, and maybe death, symbolically the resistance lives on in her friends and family. The determination to rid the village of the monster spreads even to those who were determined to appease it and ignore its degrading and advantageous behavior. To overcome the monster it was necessary that the princess took on some of his terrible attributes, but the ends justified the means as it rid the village of the monster. Whether the myth originated as a means to deal with white aggression specifically or not doesn’t really matter as the conditions under apartheid would inevitably lead most people to interpret the monster that invades a village, claims the village’s property as its own, and objectifies its women as representative of whites.

In discussing these myths it is crucial to remember that an exaggerated reliance on the past to provide answers for present dilemmas runs the dangerous risk of ignoring the fact that is evident between these two myths alone: new troubles call for new actions. In that way the princess of Bhakubha embodies when and how to break from the past. When what has been done is not enough for new dangers and threats, new ways and measures must be made. Thus the question becomes how to connect to the past without being limited to it. As

Frantz Fanon, scholar of black identity, has put it: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny...In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself" (229).

Seeing the way my lessons tended to overemphasize the importance of looking to the past, I felt the need to help my students see that the past does not resolve itself and that it depends on the vision and drive of real heroes who step up to solve the problems. So I began teaching them about the heroes of their present. I say "present" because the actions of these figures influenced the lives of the children in South Africa. I prepared a series of lessons about politicians and activists that fought against apartheid, many of whom were killed in that struggle. We spent several days discussing Steve Biko especially, because he embodies a special connection with the past while at the same time stressing the importance of breaking with yesterday.

Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, fought to improve the self-image of blacks which was too often detrimentally linked to the colonial ideologies that equate black with evil, inferiority, and laziness. He called on the great heroes of the past to disprove that belief. But he was always quick to point to the inadequacies of the past where, for example, "the white missionary described black people as thieves, lazy, sex-hungry etc., and because he equated all that was valuable with whiteness" (61). My goal was to get the students to recognize this aspect of Biko's message: "There is always an interplay between the history of a people i.e. the past, and their faith in themselves and hopes for their future" (57). Realizing this interplay, I believe, prepared children in some important ways to become themselves agents of change, to become heroes themselves.

A letter from a student represents the desired equilibrium between respect for the past and responsibility for the future. Andisiwe writes to Steve Biko's wife:

Your husband has show a lot abut life and he has open our eye to see the light. Mister Biko is a rollmodel to us becouses to day we are free and it is all because of him. Miss Biko I am telling you Mister Biko does mean a lot in our past as blacks but know I now that we no longer say black or white because now we are united.

Andisiwe told me she would have to be like Biko if the bad things at Daily Bread were to be changed. She recognized Biko's role as a hero not only in gratitude but in emulation as well.

These stories are the necessary link between the past and the present. They continue to transmit the responsibilities of successful adults in the culture, and

to render children proud of their heritage. They teach how to handle conflicts, but more importantly and more relevant to today's South Africa, they teach how easily races can come together and even seem to hint that they were always meant to. The heroes of these tales cross thresholds of racism to pave and point the way to a unified society, which is largely responsible for the powerful unifying rhetoric that is healing South Africa today.

Pierre Hugo, an apartheid scholar, says that during apartheid white South Africans were terrified of the independent figures of the past, those heroes who stood up in defense of their people and demanded fair treatment, so they tried to erase them. The mission of recovering real and mythical heroes along with their histories then became all the more urgent. Hugo quotes scholar G. M. E. Leistner who tells of the irrational fear whites had (and certainly many still have) of being "drowned in a sea of blacks...swayed by latter-day versions of Shaka, such as Nguema and Bokassa" (qtd. in Hugo 578). At its root this fear of black African heroes is a fear of self-awareness, of a life-giving connection between past and present that enables and empowers the masses of black people to govern themselves and demand the rights and opportunities that have been taken from them. A simple quote from a prominent newspaper illustrates the point: "[This continent, Africa], in fact is still possessed of an inherent savagery...the brutality of a dark continent surfaces shamefully and shockingly" (*The Citizen* qtd. in Hugo 574). The white fear of losing power and control was willing to go to any extremes necessary to contort and confuse blacks' history, saying they were lost without the West's white heroes. Biko campaigned vehemently against this, saying: "Colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip but, by some strange logic, it must turn to his past and disfigure and distort it" (105).

The situation demanded a new solution and Biko led the new movement in exorcising the demon of self-hate among blacks. "Black consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being complete in himself" (Biko 102). Biko's purpose was to show how the black culture could be sufficient in and of itself, and that it was inasmuch as it accessed its true roots and genuine history. Once rooted in its place, black consciousness was able to grow independent of anything else. And it continues by adding to the wonderful array of colors and races in South Africa.

There are still lingering signs and manifestations of the old system of racial division in townships, squatter camps, etc. But hope is rekindled whenever a child hears a story about his or her ancestors and their moral courage and determination. After its first ten years of democracy, South Africa consider itself

“The Rainbow Nation of God.” As each color is allowed to tell its own stories, it makes national identity wonderfully dependent on a wide spectrum of skin colors and shades.

In conclusion, I realized how telling stories has the power to bring together people that would otherwise remain separate, as it did for the commissioners assigned to investigate the atrocities of the apartheid regime. When Krog asks Archbishop Desmond Tutu why he thinks so many working for the commission were able to jell, he answers, “In part, I would say it is the experiences we have gone through together, even if they were awful” (363). By this same process I was reconciled to the children I taught; the gap between our distinct experiences was filled by the knowledge I shared with them. The kids learned they could trust in friends, and I was completely transformed as to how I view people, having forged a hope of human resiliency: “By a thousand stories I was scorched / a new skin” (364).

Realizing the reconciliatory power of sharing stories, Krog writes at the close of the Truth and Reconciliation commission, “Because of you / this country no longer lies / between us but within / it breathes becalmed / after being wounded / in its wondrous throat” (364). It seems that the country’s future is all the more secured now that it has recovered its collective voice, which is made possible as each individual tells her story of how she became who she is.

My experience as a teacher in South Africa taught me that what once seemed impossible to overcome falls down at our feet once we talk about it. We can come together despite the dividing differences: “Human relationships can be forged under the most deprived circumstances. People can cherish one another, survive, and foster the kind of humanity that overcomes divisions” (Krog 244). South Africa taught me that we are all healers. Whatever the forces that afflict and torture us, there is a simple beauty in sharing our loads with others. Though our tears sting, we can find profound solace if our mouths meet the ears of a friend. And whatever the spaces that divide and keep apart, they can be overcome by the fusing potential of sharing experiences through stories.

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