

Norbert Hirschhorn: Respect for the narrative

By Norbert Hirschhorn

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When someone running for public office gives you facts about the economy — so many jobs lost, size of the budget deficit — he or she is using analytic information to get a point across. But if it's a story about a single mother in St. Paul raising four children who has a hard time keeping up mortgage payments, that's conveying facts through storytelling; sociologists call it "narrative."

A well-formed argument with "facts" is meant to persuade by appeal to reason; a story is meant to persuade by appeal to emotion. Both reason and emotion are used in the mind's constant search for meaning: the coherent sense of who we are, in our own lives and in the world around us.

In the absence of certainty ("the sun will rise tomorrow"), the mind constantly interprets or creates its own meaning. Fiction and poetry are forms of interpreted meaning, but so are the stories we tell about ourselves. Such narratives dominate the sense of who we are: family stories handed down; memories of childhood; marital or family spats about who said or did what to whom; and narratives about the social, national and religious communities to which we belong.

We give meaning to our lives by narratives that speak to our emotions and memory. It can thus be distressing to change the narrative in light of new information. We are constantly selecting or interpreting facts as we need to, so as to maintain our narrative. We want to feel secure that what we know, we know; who we are, we are.

"A point of view is always a view from some point," to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, emphasizing that there never is a single viewpoint. In matters of great heat, narratives that seem perfectly sensible to some, conflict with narratives seeming perfectly sensible to others. One bitter conflict of narratives in these times is that between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Palestinian narrative is predominantly one of land: farms and olive trees, rocks and hills, family and clan stories anchored in villages and towns, going back generations. Palestinians call the expulsion in 1948 from that land named Palestine, the Nakba, the "disaster." Palestinians in refugee camps still carry crumpled deeds and wear a set of rusted keys to homes no longer theirs.

The Jewish/Zionist narrative, on the other hand, is predominantly one of history: a people exiled from the same land 2,000 years ago, wandering as strangers in strange countries; always at risk of persecution, expulsion, murder; holding on to their sacred texts and folk

traditions, remembering ("If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill" - Psalm 137, written 2,500 years ago, with its devastating final lines, "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us — he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks").

Every event, every "fact" is interpreted in the light of these contending narratives. People become trapped in their own narratives. It seems for a Jew or a Palestinian to now acknowledge the validity of the other's narrative is to diminish one's own. We see the tragic result in our daily news.

In the spate of national movements of the late 19th century, Zionist Jews faced with ongoing pogroms and internal exile declared themselves ready to return to the ancestral land, to create a Jewish homeland. Especially following the disaster of the Holocaust, the founders of Israel were determined that Jews would never be weak again. When Jews arrived and settled in the Holy Land, however, they found the Palestinians already there.

For peace to come, the conflicting narratives must first be understood. So little is known in the USA, or in Israel for that matter, of the daily suffering and humiliation Israeli occupation of Palestinian land creates. "Aren't we human beings?" the Palestinians ask. Many Jews, on the other hand, see Hitler in every external threat: "They want to annihilate us!"

But with understanding, decent elements common to both narratives may be discovered: dignity and security, above all. Efforts to create such common space and a new narrative exist. The Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, with Palestinian Edward Said, organized the West-Eastern Divan Workshop and Orchestra, Israelis and Arabs performing together. Grieving parents from Israel and Palestine come together, their story touchingly told in the documentary "Encounter Point." Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam ('Oasis of Peace') is a Jewish-Arab village in Israel demonstrating the possibility of co-existence.

Yet, at the moment, all attempts at peace and understanding seem delusional, utopian, naïve. It's the violent ones who now have the loudest voices and use the most brutal weapons to impose their own narrative as the only legitimate reality. But as George Mitchell, who brokered the peace in Northern Ireland, said, "It took 700 days of failure and one day of success."

Perhaps Israelis and Palestinians can begin by seeing each other's narratives in movies and TV soaps, and reading each other's poetry — Mahmoud Darwish, Yehuda Amichai. Is this a silly idea? How can poetry make a difference? Yet, as our great American poet William Carlos Williams wrote, "It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there./ Hear me out/ for I too am concerned/ and every man/ who wants to die at peace in his bed/ besides."

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